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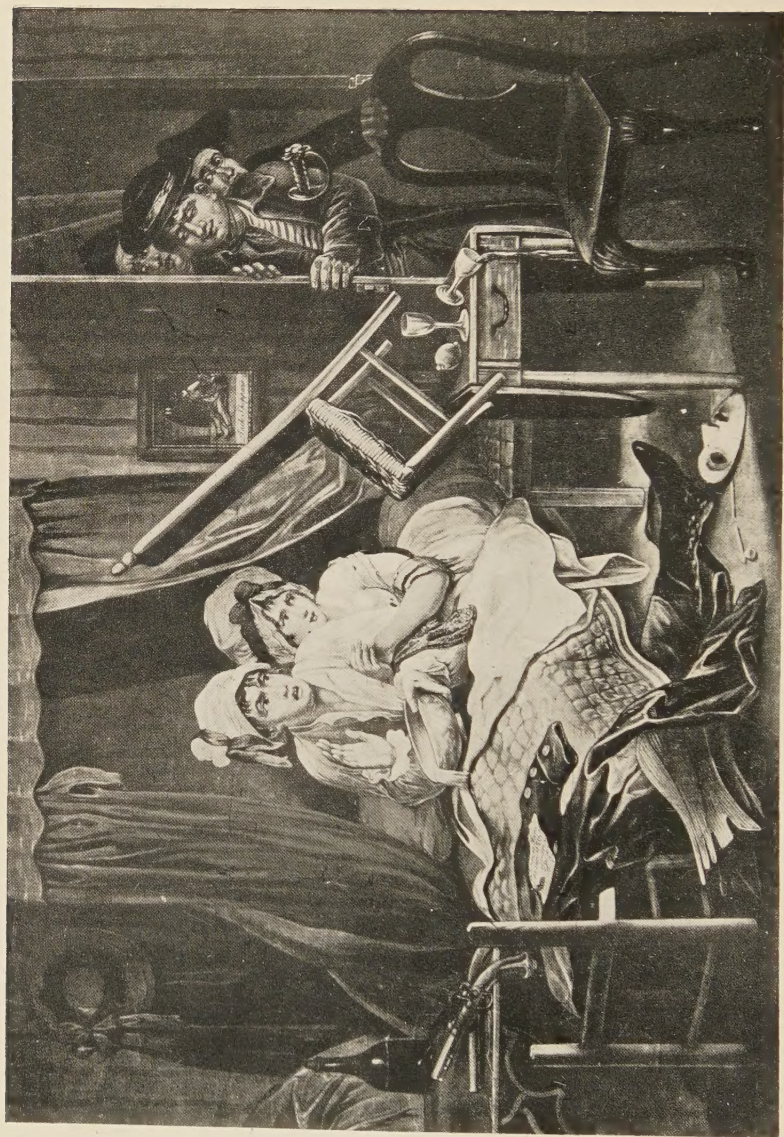
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THE PRESS-GANG



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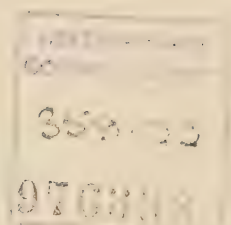
THE PRESS-GANG AFLOAT AND ASHORE

BY

J. R. HUTCHINSON

LONDON
EVELEIGH NASH
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THE PRESS-GANG

CHAPTER I

HOW THE PRESS-GANG CAME IN

THE practice of pressing men—that is to say, of taking by intimidation or force those who will not volunteer—would seem to have been world-wide in its adoption.

Wherever man desired to have a thing done, and was powerful enough to insure the doing of it, there he attained his end by the simple expedient of compelling others to do for him what he, unaided, could not do for himself.

The individual, provided he did not conspire in sufficient numbers to impede or defeat the end in view, counted only as a food-consuming atom in the human mass which was set to work out the purpose of the master mind and hand. His face value in the problem was that of a living wage. If he sought to enhance his value by opposing the master hand, the master hand seized him and wrung his withers.

So long as the compelling power confined the doing of the things it desired done to works of construction, it met with little opposition in its designs, experienced little difficulty in coercing the labour

necessary for piling its walls, excavating its tanks, raising its pyramids and castles, or for levelling its roads and building its ships and cities. These were the commonplace achievements of peace, at which even the coerced might toil unafraid; for apart from the normal incidence of death, such works entailed little danger to the lives of the multitudes who wrought upon them. Men could in consequence be procured for them by the exercise of the minimum of coercion—by, that is to say, the mere threat of it.

When peace went to the wall and the pressed man was called upon to go to battle, the case assumed another aspect, an acuter phase. Given a state of war, the danger to life and limb, the incidence of death, at once jumped enormously, and in proportion as these disquieting factors in the pressed man's lot mounted up, just in that proportion did his opposition to the power that sought to take him become the more determined, strenuous, and undisguised.

Particularly was this true of warlike operations upon the sea, for to the extraordinary and terrible risks of war were here added the ordinary but ever-present dangers of wind and wave and storm, sufficient in themselves to appal the unaccustomed and to antagonise the unwilling. In face of these superlative risks the difficulty of procuring men was accentuated a thousand-fold, and with it both the nature and the degree of the coercive force necessary to be exercised for their procurement.

In these circumstances the Ruling Power had no option but to resort to more exigent means of attaining its end. In times of peace, working through myriad hands, it had constructed a thousand monuments of

ornamental or utilitarian industry. These, with the commonweal they represented, were now threatened and must be protected at all costs. What more reasonable than to demand of those who had built, or of their successors in the perpetual inheritance of toil, that they should protect what they had reared. Hitherto, in most cases, the men required to meet the national need had submitted at a threat. They had to live, and coercive toil meant at least a living wage. Now, made rebellious by a fearful looking forward to the risks they were called upon to incur, they had to be met by more effective measures. Faced by this emergency, Power did not mince matters. It laid violent hands upon the unwilling subject and forced him, *nolens volens*, to sail its ships, to man its guns, and to fight its battles by sea as he already, under less overt compulsion, did its bidding by land.

It is with this phase of pressing—pressing open, violent and unashamed—that we purpose here to deal, and more particularly with pressing as it applies to the sea and sailors, to the Navy and the defence of an Island Kingdom.

At what time the pressing of men for the sea service of the Crown was first resorted to in these islands it is impossible to determine. There is evidence, however, that the practice was not only in vogue, but firmly established as an adjunct of power, as early as the days of the Saxon kings. It was, in fact, coeval with feudalism, of which it may be described as a side-issue incidental to a maritime situation; for though it is impossible to point to any species of fee, as understood of the tenure of land,

under which the holder was liable to render service at sea, yet it must not be forgotten that the great ports of the kingdom, and more especially the Cinque Ports, were from time immemorial bound to find ships for national purposes, whenever called upon to do so, in return for the peculiar rights and privileges conferred upon them by the Crown. The supply of ships necessarily involved the supply of men to sail and fight them, and in this supply, or, rather, in the mode of obtaining it, we have undoubtedly the origin of the later impress system.

With the reign of John the practice springs into sudden prominence. The incessant activities of that uneasy king led to almost incessant pressing, and at certain crises in his reign commission after commission is directed, in feverish succession, to the sheriffs of counties and the bailiffs of seaports throughout the kingdom, straitly enjoining them to arrest and stay all ships within their respective jurisdictions, and with the ships the mariners who sail them.¹ No exception was taken to these edicts. Long usage rendered the royal lien indefeasible.²

¹ By a plausible euphemism they were said to be "hired." As a matter of fact, both ships and men were retained during the royal pleasure at rates fixed by custom.

² In more modern times the pressing of ships, though still put forward as a prerogative of the Crown, was confined in the main to unforeseen exigencies of transport. On the fall of Louisburg in 1760, vessels were pressed at that port in order to carry the prisoners of war to France (*Ad.** I. 1491—Capt. Byron, 17 June 1760); and in 1764, again, we find Capt. Brereton, of the *Falmouth*, forcibly impressing the East India ship *Revenge* for the purpose of transporting to Fort St. George, in British India, the company, numbering some four hundred and twenty-one souls, of the *Siam*, then recently condemned at Manilla as unseaworthy.—*Ad.* I. 1498—Letters of Capt. Brereton, 1764.

* *Ad.*, in the footnotes, signifies *Admiralty Records*.

In the carrying out of the royal commands there was consequently, at this stage in the development of pressing, little if any resort to direct coercion. From the very nature of the case the principle of coercion was there, but it was there only in the bud. The king's right to hale whom he would into his service being practically undisputed, a threat of reprisals in the event of disobedience answered all purposes, and even this threat was as yet more often implied than openly expressed. King John was perhaps the first to clothe it in words. Requisitioning the services of the mariners of Wales, a notoriously disloyal body, he gave the warrant, issued in 1208, a severely minatory turn. "Know ye for certain," it ran, "that if ye act contrary to this, we will cause you and the masters of your vessels to be hanged, and all your goods to be seized for our use."

At this point in the gradual subjection of the seaman to the needs of the nation, defensive or the contrary, we are confronted by an event as remarkable in its nature as it is epoch-making in its consequences. Magna Charta was sealed on the 15th of June 1215, and within a year of that date, on, namely, the 14th of April then next ensuing, King John issued his commission to the barons of twenty-two seaports, requiring them, in terms admitting of neither misconstruction nor compromise, to arrest all ships, and to assemble those ships, together with their companies, in the River of Thames before a certain day.¹ This wholesale embargo upon the shipping and seamen of the nation, imposed as it was immediately after the ensealing of Magna Charta, raises a question of great

¹ Hardy, *Rotuli Litterarum Clausarum*, 1833.

constitutional interest. In what sense, and to what extent, was the Charter of English Liberties intended to apply to the seafaring man?

Essentially a tyrant and a ruthless promise-breaker, John's natural cruelty would in itself sufficiently account for the dire penalties threatened under the warrant of 1208; but neither his tyranny, his faithlessness of character, nor his very human irritation at the concessions wrung from him by his barons, can explain to our satisfaction why, having granted a charter affirming and safeguarding the liberties of, ostensibly, every class of his people, he should immediately inflict upon one of those classes, and that, too, the one least of all concerned in his historic dispute, the pains of a most rigorous impressment. The only rational explanation of his conduct is, that in thus acting he was contravening no convention, doing violence to no covenant, but was, on the contrary, merely exercising, in accordance with time-honoured usage, an already well-recognised, clearly defined and firmly seated prerogative which the great charter he had so recently put his hand to was in no sense intended to limit or annul.

This view of the case is confirmed by subsequent events. Press warrants, identical in every respect save one with the historic warrant of 1216, continued to emanate from the Crown long after King John had gone to his account, and, what is more to the point, to emanate unchallenged. Stubbs himself, our greatest constitutional authority, repeatedly admits as much. Every crisis in the destinies of the Island Kingdom—and they were many and frequent—produced its batch of these procuratory documents, every

batch its quota of pressed men. The inference is plain. The mariner was the bondsman of the sea, and to him the *Nullus liber homo capiatur* clause of the Great Charter was never intended to apply. In his case a dead-letter from the first, it so remained throughout the entire chapter of his vicissitudes.

The chief point wherein the warrants of later times differed from those of King John was this: As time went on the penalties they imposed on those who resisted the press became less and less severe. The death penalty fell into speedy disuse, if, indeed, it was ever inflicted at all. Imprisonment for a term of from one to two years, with forfeiture of goods, was held to meet all the exigencies of the case. Gradually even this modified practice underwent amelioration, until at length it dawned upon the official intelligence that a seaman who was free to respond to the summons of the boatswain's whistle constituted an infinitely more valuable physical asset than one who cursed his king and his Maker in irons. All punishment of the condign order, for contempt or resistance of the press, now went by the board, and in its stead the seaman was merely admonished in paternal fashion, as in a Proclamation of 1623, to take the king's shilling "dutifully and reverently" when it was tendered to him.

In its apparent guilelessness the admonition was nevertheless woefully deceptive. Like the subdued beat of drum by which, some five years later, the seamen of London were lured to Tower Hill, there to be seized and thrown bodily into the waiting fleet, it masked under its mild exterior the old threat of coercion in a new form. The ancient pains and

penalties were indeed no more ; but for the back of the sailor who was so ill-advised as to defy the press there was another rod in pickle. He could now be taken forcibly.

For side by side with the negative change involved in the abolition of the old punishments, there had been in progress, throughout the intervening centuries, a positive development of far worse omen for the hapless sailor-man. The root-principle of direct coercion, necessarily inherent in any system that seeks to foist an arbitrary and obnoxious status upon any considerable body of men, was slowly but surely bursting into bud. The years that had seen the unprestressed seaman freed from the dread of the yardarm and the horrors of the forepeak, had bred a new terror for him. Centuries of usage had strengthened the arm of that hated personage the Press-Master, and the compulsion which had once skulked under cover of a threat now threw off its disguise and stalked the seafaring man for what it really was—Force, open and unashamed. The *dernier ressort* of former days was now the first resort. The seafaring man who refused the king's service when "admonished" thereto had short shrift. He was "first knocked down, and then bade to stand in the king's name." Such, literally and without undue exaggeration, was the later system which, reaching the climax of its insolent pretensions to justifiable violence in the eighteenth century, for upwards of a hundred years bestrode the neck of the unfortunate sailor like some monstrous Old Man of the Sea.

Outbursts of violent pressing before the dawn of the eighteenth century, though spasmodic and on the

whole infrequent, were not entirely unknown. Times of national stress were peculiarly productive of them. Thus when, in 1545, there was reason to fear a French invasion, pressing of the most violent and unprecedented character was openly resorted to in order to man the fleet. The class who suffered most severely on that occasion were the fisher folk of Devon, "the most part" of whom were "taken as marryners to serve the king."¹

During the Civil Wars of the next century both parties to the strife issued press warrants which were enforced with the utmost rigour. The Restoration saw a marked recrudescence of similar measures. How great was the need of men at that time, and how exigent the means employed to procure them, may be gathered from the fact, cited by Pepys, that in 1666 the fleet lay idle for a whole fortnight "without any demand for a farthing worth of anything, but only to get men." The genial diarist was deeply moved by the scenes of violence that followed. They were, he roundly declares, "a shame to think of."

The origin of the term "pressing," with its cognates "to press" and "pressed," is not less remarkable than the genesis of the violence it so aptly describes. Originally the man who was required for the king's service at sea, like his twin brother the soldier, was not "pressed" in the sense in which we now use the term. He was merely subjected to a process called "presting." To "prest" a man meant to enlist him by means of what was technically known

¹ *State Papers*, Henry VIII.—Lord Russell to the Privy Council, 22 Aug. 1545. Bourne, who cites the incident in his *Tudor Seamen*, misses the essential point that the fishermen were forcibly pressed.

as “prest” money — “prest” being the English equivalent of the obsolete French *prest*, now *prêt*, meaning “ready.” In the recruiter’s vocabulary, therefore, “prest” money stood for what is nowadays, in both services, commonly termed the “king’s shilling,” and the man who, either voluntarily or under duress, accepted or received that shilling at the recruiter’s hands, was said to be “prest” or “prest.” In other words, having taken the king’s ready money, he was thenceforth, during the king’s pleasure, “ready” for the king’s service.

By the transfer of the prest shilling from the hand of the recruiter to the pouch of the seaman a subtle contract, as between the latter and his sovereign, was supposed to be set up, than which no more solemn or binding pact could exist save between a man and his Maker. One of the parties to the contract was more often than not, it is true, a strongly dissenting party ; but although under the common law of the land this circumstance would have rendered any similar contract null and void, in this amazing transaction between the king and his “prest” subject it was held to be of no vitiating force. From the moment the king’s shilling, by whatever means, found its way into the sailor’s possession, from that moment he was the king’s man, bound in heavy penalties to toe the line of duty, and, should circumstances demand it, to fight the king’s enemies to the death, be that fate either theirs or his.

By some strange irony of circumstance there happened to be in the English language a word — “pressed” — which tallied almost exactly in pronunciation with the old French word *prest*, so long employed,

as we have seen, to differentiate from his fellows the man who, by the devious means we have here described, was made "ready" for the sea service. "Press" means to constrain, to urge with force—definitions precisely connoting the development and manner of violent enlistment. Hence, as the change from covert to overt violence grew in strength, "pressing," in the mouths of the people at large, came to be synonymous with that most obnoxious, oppressive and fear-inspiring system of recruiting which, in the course of time, took the place of its milder and more humane antecedent, "presting." The "prest" man disappeared,¹ and in his stead there came upon the scene his later substitute the "pressed" man, "forced," as Pepys so graphically describes his condition, "against all law to be gone." An odder coincidence than this gradual substitution of "pressed" for *prest*, or one more grimly appropriate in its application, it would surely be impossible to discover in the whose history of nomenclature.

With the growth of the power and violence of the impress there was gradually inaugurated another change, which perhaps played a larger part than any other feature of the system in making it finally obnoxious to the nation at large—finally, because, as we shall see, the nation long endured its exactions with pathetic submission and lamentable indifference. The incidence of pressing was no longer confined, as in its earlier stages, to the overflow of the populace

¹ The Law Officers of the Crown retained him, on paper, until the close of the eighteenth century—an example in which they were followed by the Admiralty. To admit his disappearance would have been to knock the bottom out of their case.

upon the country's rivers, and bays, and seas. Gradually, as naval needs grew in volume and urgency, the press net was cast wider and wider, until at length, during the great century of struggle, when the system was almost constantly working at its highest pressure and greatest efficiency, practically every class of the population of these islands was subjected to its merciless inroads, if not decimated by its indiscriminate exactions.

On the very threshold of the century we stumble upon an episode curiously indicative of the set of the tide. Czar Peter of Russia had been recently in England, acquiring a knowledge of English customs which, on his return home, he immediately began to put in practice. His navy, such as it was, was wretchedly manned.¹ Russian serfs made bad sailors and worse seamen. In the English ships thronging the quays at Archangel there was, however, plenty of good stuff—men who could use the sea without being sick, men capable of carrying a ship to her destination without piling her up on the rocks or seeking nightly shelter under the land. He accordingly pressed every ninth man out of those ships.

When news of this high-handed proceeding

¹ The navy got together by Czar Peter had all but disappeared by the time Catherine II. came to the throne. "Ichabod" was written over the doors of the Russian Admiralty. Their ships of war were few in number, unseaworthy, ill-found, ill-manned. Two thousand able-bodied seamen could with difficulty be got together in an emergency. The nominal fighting strength of the fleet stood high, but that strength in reality consisted of men "one half of whom had never sailed out of the Gulf of Finland, whilst the other half had never sailed anywhere at all." When the fleet was ordered to sea, the Admiralty "put soldiers on board, and by calling them sailors persuaded themselves that they really were so."—*State Papers, Russia*, vol. lxxvii.—Macartney, Nov. 16-27, 1766.

reached England, it roused the Queen and her advisers to indignation. Winter though it was, they lost no time in dispatching Charles Whitworth, a rising diplomat of the suavest type, as "Envoy Extraordinary to our Good (but naughty) Brother the Czar of Muscovy," with instructions to demand the release, immediate and unconditional, of the pressed men. Whitworth found the Czar at Moscow. The Autocrat of All the Russias listened affably enough to what he had to say, but refused his demand in terms that left scant room for doubt as to his sincerity of purpose, and none for protracted "conversations." "Every Prince," he declared for sole answer, "can take what he likes out of his own havens."¹ The position thus taken up was unassailable. Centuries of usage hedged the prerogative in, and Queen Anne herself, in the few years she had been on the throne, had not only exercised it with a free hand, but had laid that hand without scruple upon many a foreign seaman.

The lengths to which the system had gone by the end of the third quarter of the century is thrown into vivid relief by two incidents, one of which occurred in 1726, the other fifty years later.

In the former year one William Kingston, pressed in the Downs—a man who hailed from Lyme Regis and habitually "used the sea"—was, notwithstanding that fact, discharged by express Admiralty order because he was a "substantial man and had a landed estate."²

¹ *Ad.* 1. 1436—Capt. J. Anderson's letters and enclosures; *State Papers, Russia*, vol. iv.—Whitworth to Secretary Harley.

² *Ad.* 1. 1473—Capt. Charles Browne, 25 March 1726, and endorsement.

The incident of 1776, known as the Duncan case, occurred, or rather began, at North Shields. Lieutenant Oaks, captain of the press-gang in that town, one day met in the streets a man who, unfortunately for his future, "had the appearance of a seaman." He accordingly pressed him; whereupon the man, whose name was Duncan, produced the title-deeds of certain house property in London, down Wapping way, worth some six pounds per annum, and claimed his discharge on the ground that as a freeholder and a voter he was immune from the press. The lieutenant laughed the suggestion to scorn, and Duncan was shipped south to the fleet.

The matter did not end there. Duncan's friends espoused his cause and took energetic steps for his release. Threatened with an action at law, and averse from incurring either unnecessary risks or opprobrium where pressed men were concerned, the Admiralty referred the case to Mr. Attorney-General (afterwards Lord) Thurlow for his opinion.

The point of law Thurlow was called upon to resolve was, "Whether being a freeholder is an exception from being pressed;" and as Duncan was represented in counsel's instructions—on what ground, other than his "appearance," is not clear—to be a man who habitually used the sea, it is hardly matter for surprise that the great jurist's opinion, biassed as it obviously was by that alleged fact, should have been altogether inimical to the pressed man and favourable to the Admiralty.

"I see no reason," he writes, in his crabbed hand and nervous diction, "why men using the sea, and being otherwise fit objects to be impressed into His

Majesty's service, should be exempted only because they are Freeholders. Nor did I ever read or hear of such an exemption. Therefore, unless some use or practice, which I am ignorant of, gives occasion to this doubt, I see no reason for a Mariner being discharged, seriously, because he is a Freeholder. It's a qualification easily attained: a single house at Wapping would ship a first-rate man-of-war. If a Freeholder is exempt, *co nomine*, it will be impossible to go on with the pressing service.¹ There is no knowing a Freeholder by sight: and if claiming that character, or even showing deeds is sufficient, few Sailors will be without it."²

Backed by this opinion, so nicely in keeping with its own inclinations, the Admiralty kept the man. Its views, like its practice, had undergone an antipodal change since the Kingston incident of fifty years before. And possession, commonly reputed to be nine points of the law, more than made up for the lack of that element in Mr. Attorney-General's sophistical reasoning.

In this respect Thurlow was in good company, for although Coke, who lived before violent pressing became the rule, had given it as his opinion that the king could not lawfully press men to serve him in his wars, the legal luminaries who came after him, and more particularly those of the eighteenth century, differed from him almost to a man. Blackstone,

¹ It would have been equally impossible to go on with the naval service had the fleet contained many freeholders like John Barnes. Granted leave of absence from his ship, the *Neptune*, early in May, "in order to give his vote in the city," he "return'd not till the 8th of August."—*Ad.* 1. 2653—Capt. Whorwood, 23 Aug. 1741.

² *Ad.* 7. 299—Law Officers' Opinions, 1756-77, No. 64.

whilst admitting that no statute expressly legalised pressing, reminded the nation—with a leer, we might almost say—that many statutes strongly implied, and hence—so he put it—amply justified it. In thus begging the question he had in mind the so-called Statutes of Exemption which, in protecting from impressment certain persons or classes of persons, proceeded on the assumption, so dear to the Sea Lords, that the Crown possessed the right to press all. This also was the view taken by Yorke, Solicitor-General in 1757. “I take the prerogative,” he declares, “to be most clearly legal.”¹

Another group of lawyers took similar, though less exalted ground. Of these the most eminent was that “great oracle of law,” Lord Mansfield. “The power of pressing,” he contends, “is founded upon immemorial usage allowed for ages. If not, it can have no ground to stand upon. The practice is deduced from that trite maxim of the Constitutional Law of England, that private mischief had better be submitted to than that public detriment should ensue.”

The sea-lawyer had yet to be heard. With him “private mischief” counted for much, the usage of past ages for very little. He lived and suffered in the present. Of common law he knew nothing, but he possessed a fine appreciation of common justice, and this forced from him an indictment of the system that held him in thrall as scathing in its truth, its simplicity and its logic as it is spontaneous and untutored in its diction.

“You confidently tell us,” said he, dipping his

¹ *Ad. 7.* 298—Law Officers’ Opinions, 1733–56, No. 102.

pen in the gall of bitterness, "that our King is a father to us and our officers friends. They are so, we must confess, in some respects, for Indeed they use us like Children in Whiping us into Obedience. As for English Tars to be the Legitimate Sons of Liberty, it is an Old Cry which we have Experienced and Knows it to be False. God knows, the Constitution is admirable well Callculated for the Safety and Happiness of His Majesty's Subjects who live by Employments on Shore; but alas, we are not Considered as Subjects of the same Sovereign, unless it be to Drag us by Force from our Families to Fight the Battles of a Country which Refuses us Protection."¹

Such, in rough outline, was the Impress System of the eighteenth century. In its inception, its development, and more especially in its extraordinary culmination, it perhaps constitutes the greatest anomaly, as it undoubtedly constitutes the grossest imposition, any free people ever submitted to. Although unlawful in the sense of having no foundation in law, and oppressive and unjust in that it yearly enslaved, under the most noxious conditions, thousands against their will, it was nevertheless for more than a hundred years tolerated and fostered as the readiest, speediest and most effective means humanly devisable for the manning of a fleet whose toll upon a free people, in the same period of time, swelled to more than thrice its original bulk. Standing as a bulwark against aggression and conquest, it ground under its heel the very people it protected, and made them slaves in order to keep them free. Masquerading as a protector, it dragged the wage-earner from his

¹ *Ad.* 1. 5125—Petitions of the Seamen of the Fleet, 1797.

home and cast his starving family upon the doubtful mercies of the parish. And as if this were not enough, whilst justifying its existence on the score of public benefit it played havoc with the fisheries, clipped the wings of the merchant service, and sucked the life-blood out of trade.

It was on the rising tide of such egregious contradictions as these that the press-gang came in ; for the press-gang was at once the embodiment and the active exponent of all that was anomalous or bad in the Impress System.

CHAPTER II

WHY THE GANG WAS NECESSARY

THE root of the necessity that seized the British sailor and made of him what he in time became, the most abject creature and the most efficient fighting unit the world has ever produced, lay in the fact that he was island-born.

In that island a great and vigorous people had sprung into being—a people great in their ambitions, commerce and dominion; vigorous in holding what they had won against the assaults, meditated or actual, of those who envied their greatness and coveted their possessions. Of this island people, as of their world-wide interests, the “chiefest defence” was a “good fleet at sea.”¹

The Peace of Utrecht, marking though it did the close of the protracted war of the Spanish Succession, brought to the Island Kingdom not peace, but a sword; for although its Navy was now as unrivalled as its commerce and empire, the supreme struggle for existence, under the guise of the mastery of the sea, was only just begun. Decade after decade, as that struggle waxed and waned

¹ This famous phrase is used, perhaps for the first time, by Josiah Burchett, sometime Secretary to the Admiralty, in his *Observations on the Navy*, 1700.

but went remorselessly on, the Navy grew in ships, the ships in tonnage and weight of metal, and with their growth the demand for men, imperative as the very existence of the nation, mounted ever higher and higher. In 1756 fifty thousand sufficed for the nation's needs. By 1780 the number had reached ninety-two thousand; and with 1802 it touched high-water mark in the unprecedented total of one hundred and twenty-nine thousand men in actual sea pay.¹

Beset by this enormous and steadily growing demand, the Admiralty, the defensive proxy of the nation, had perforce to face the question as to where and how the men were to be obtained.

The source of supply was never at any time in doubt. Here, ready to hand, were some hundreds of thousands of persons using the sea, or following vocations merging into the sea in the capacity of colliers, bargemen, boatmen, longshoremen, fishermen and deep-sea sailors or merchantmen, who constituted the natural Naval Reserve of an Island Kingdom—a reserve ample, if judiciously drawn upon, to meet, and more than meet, the Navy's every need.

The question of means was one more complicated, more delicate, and hence incomparably more difficult of solution. To draw largely upon these seafaring classes, numerous and fit though they were, meant detriment to trade, and if the Navy was the fist, trade was the backbone of the nation. The suffer-

¹ *Ad. 7.* 567—Navy Progress, 1756–1805. These figures are below rather than above the mark, since the official returns on which they are based are admittedly deficient.

ings of trade, moreover, reacted unpleasantly upon those in power at Whitehall. Methods of procurement must therefore be devised of a nature such as to insure that neither trade nor Admiralty should suffer—that they should, in fact, enjoy what the unfortunate sailor never knew, some reasonable measure of ease.

In its efforts to extricate itself and trade from the complex difficulties of the situation, Admiralty had at its back what an eighteenth century Beresford would doubtless have regarded as the finest talent of the service. Neither the unemployed admiral nor the half-pay captain had at that time, in his enforced retirement at Bath or Cheltenham, taken seriously to parliamenteering, company promoting, or the concocting of pedigrees as a substitute for walking the quarter-deck. His occupation was indeed gone, but in its stead there had come to him what he had rarely enjoyed whilst on the active service list—opportunity. Carried away by the stimulus of so unprecedented a situation as that afforded by the chance to make himself heard, he rushed into print with projects and suggestions which would have revolutionised the naval policy and defence of the country at a stroke had they been carried into effect. Or he devoted his leisure to the invention of signal codes, semaphore systems, embryo torpedoes, gun carriages, and—what is more to our point—methods ostensibly calculated to man the fleet in the easiest, least oppressive and most expeditious manner possible for a free people. Armed with these schemes, he bombarded the Admiralty with all the pertinacity he had shown in

his quarter-deck days in applying for leave or seeking promotion. Many, perhaps most, of the inventions which it was thus sought to father upon the Sea Lords, were happily never more heard of; but here and there one, commending itself by its seeming practicability, was selected for trial and duly put to the test.

Fair to look upon while still in the air, these fruits of leisured superannuation proved deceptively unsound when plucked by the hand of experiment. Registration, first adopted in 1696, held out undeniable advantages to the seaman. Under its provisions he drew a yearly allowance when not required at sea, and extra prize-money when on active service. Yet the bait did not tempt him, and the system was soon discarded as useless and inoperative. Bounty, defined by some sentimentalist as a "bribe to Neptune," for a while made a stronger appeal; but, ranging as it did from five to almost any number of pounds under one hundred per head, it proved a bribe indeed, and by putting an irresistible premium on desertion threatened to decimate the very ships it was intended to man. In 1795 what was commonly known as the Quota Scheme superseded it. This was a plan of Pitt's devising, under which each county contributed to the fleet according to its population, the quota varying from one thousand and eighty-one men for Yorkshire to twenty-three for Rutland, whilst a minor Act levied special toll on seaports, London leading the way with five thousand seven hundred and four men. Like its predecessor Bounty, however, this mode of recruiting drained the Navy in order to feed it. Both

systems, moreover, possessed another and more serious defect. When their initial enthusiasm had cooled, the counties, perhaps from force of habit as component parts of a country whose backbone was trade, bought in the cheapest market. Hence the Quota Man, consisting as he generally did of the offscourings of the merchant service, was seldom or never worth the money paid for him. An old man-o'-war's-man, picking up a miserable specimen of this class of recruit by the slack of his ragged breeches, remarked to his grinning messmates as he dangled the disreputable object before their eyes: "'Ere's a lubber as cost a guinea a pound!" He was not far out in his estimate.

As in the case of the good old method of recruiting by beat of drum and the lure of the king's shilling, system after system thus failed to draw into its net, however speciously that net was spread, either the class or the number of men whose services it was desired to requisition. And whilst these futilities were working out their own condemnation the stormcloud of necessity grew bigger and bigger on the national horizon. Let trade suffer as it might, there was nothing for it but to discard all new-fangled notions and to revert to the system which the usage of ages had sanctioned. The return was imperative. Failing what Junius stigmatised as the "spur of the Press," the right men in the right numbers were not to be procured. The wisdom of the nation was at fault. It could find no other way.

There were, moreover, other reasons why the press-gang was to the Navy an indispensable ap-

pendage—reasons perhaps of little moment singly, but of tremendous weight in the scale of naval necessity when lumped together and taken in the aggregate.

Of these the most prominent was that fatal flaw in naval administration which Nelson was in the habit of anathematising as the "Infernal System." Due partly to lack of foresight and false economy at Whitehall, partly to the character of the sailor himself, it resolved itself into this, that whenever a ship was paid off and put out of commission, all on board of her, excepting only her captain and her lieutenants, ceased to be officially connected with the Navy. Now, as ships were for various reasons constantly going out of commission, and as the paying off of a first- second- or third-rate automatically discharged from their country's employ a body of men many hundreds in number, the "lowering" effects of such a system, working year in, year out, upon a fleet always in chronic difficulties for men, may be more readily imagined than described.

To a certain limited extent the loss to the service was minimised by a process called "turning over"; that is to say, the company of a ship paying off was turned over bodily, or as nearly intact as it was possible to preserve it, to another ship which at the moment chanced to be ready, or making ready, for sea. Or it might be that the commander of a ship paying off, transferred to another ship fitting out, carried the best men of his late command, commonly known as "old standers," along with him.

Unfortunately, the occasion of fitting out did not always coincide with the occasion of paying off; and

although turnovers were frequently made by Admiralty order, there were serious obstacles in the way of their becoming general. Once the men were paid off, the Admiralty had no further hold upon them. By a stretch of authority they might, it is true, be confined to quarters or on board a guardship; but if in these circumstances they rose in a body and got ashore, they could neither be retaken nor punished as deserters, but—to use the good old service term—had to be “rose” again by means of the press-gang. Turnovers, accordingly, depended mainly upon two closely related circumstances: the goodwill of the men, and the popularity of commanders. A captain who was notorious for his use of the lash or the irons, or who was reputed unlucky, rarely if ever got a turnover except by the adoption of the most stringent measures. One who, on the other hand, treated his men with common humanity, who bested the enemy in fair fight and sent rich prizes into port, never wanted for “followers,” and rarely, if ever, had recourse to the gang.¹ Under such men

¹ In his Autobiography Lord Dundonald asserts that he was only once obliged to resort to pressing—a statement so remarkable, considering the times he lived in, as to call for explanation. The occasion was when, returning from a year’s “exile in a tub,” a converted collier that “sailed like a hay-stack,” he fitted out the *Pallas* at Portsmouth and could obtain no volunteers. Setting his gangs to work, he got together a scratch crew of the wretchedest description; yet so marvellous were the personality and disciplinary ability of the man, that with only this unpromising material ready to his hand he intercepted the Spanish trade off Cape Finisterre and captured four successive prizes of very great value. The *Pallas* returned to Portsmouth with “three large golden candlesticks, each about five feet high, placed upon the mast-heads,” and from that time onward Dundonald’s reputation as a “lucky” commander was made. He never again had occasion to invoke the aid of the gang.

the seaman would gladly serve "even in a dung barge."¹ Unhappily for the service, such commanders were comparatively few, and in their absence the Infernal System drained the Navy of its best blood and accentuated a hundred-fold the already overwhelming need for the impress.

The old-time sailor,² again, was essentially a creature of contradictions. Notorious for a "swearing rogue," who punctuated his strange sea-lingo with horrid oaths and appalling blasphemies, he made the responses required by the services of his Church with all the superstitious awe and tender piety of a child. Inconspicuous for his thrift or "forehandedness," it was nevertheless a common circumstance with him to have hundreds of pounds, in pay and prize-money, to his credit at his bankers, the Navy Pay-Office; and though during a voyage he earned his money as hardly as a horse, and was as poor as a church mouse, yet the moment he stepped ashore he made it fly by the handful and squandered it, as the saying went, like an ass. When he was sober, which was seldom enough provided he could obtain drink, he possessed scarcely a rag to his back; but when he was drunk he was himself the first to acknowledge that he had "too many cloths in the wind." According to his

¹ *Ad.* 1. 2733—Capt. Young, 28 Sept. 1776.

² The use of the word "sailor" was long regarded with disfavour by the Navy Board, who saw in it only a colourless substitute for the good old terms "seaman" and "mariner." Capt. Bertie, of the *Ruby* gunship, once reported the pressing of a "sailor," Thomas Letting by name, out of a collier in Yarmouth Roads, and was called upon by My Lords to define the new-fangled term. This he did with admirable circumlocution. "As for explaining the word 'sailor,'" said he, "I can do it no otherwise than (by) letting of you know that Thomas Letting is a Sailor."—*Ad.* 1. 1468—Capt. Bertie, 6 May 1706.

own showing, his wishes in life were limited to three: "An island of tobacco, a river of rum, and—more rum;" but according to those who knew him better than he knew himself, he would at any time sacrifice all three, together with everything else he possessed, for the gratification of a fourth and unconfessed desire, the dearest wish of his life, woman. Ward's description of him, slightly paraphrased, fits him to a hair: "A salt-water vagabond, who is never at home but when he is at sea, and never contented but when he is ashore; never at ease until he has drawn his pay, and never satisfied until he has spent it; and when his pocket is empty he is just as much respected as a father-in-law is when he has beggared himself to give a good portion with his daughter."¹ With all this he was brave beyond belief on the deck of a ship, timid to the point of cowardice on the back of a horse; and although he fought to a victorious finish many of his country's most desperate fights, and did more than any other man of his time to make her the great nation she became, yet his roving life robbed him of his patriotism and made it necessary to wring from him by violent means the allegiance he shirked. It was at this point that he came in contact with what he hated most in life, yet dearly loved to dodge—the press-gang.

That such a creature of contradictions should be averse from serving the country he loved is perhaps the most consistent trait in his character; for here at least the sailor had substantial grounds for his inconsistency.

For one thing, his aversion to naval service was

¹ Ward, *Wooden World Dissected*, 1744.

as old as the Navy itself, having grown with its growth. We have seen in what manner King John was obliged to admonish the sailor in order to induce him to take his prest-money; and Edward III., referring to his attitude in the fourteenth century, is said to have summed up the situation in the pregnant words: "There is navy enough in England, were there only the will." Raleigh, recalling with bitterness of soul those glorious Elizabethan days when no adventurer ever dreamt of pressing, scoffed at the seamen of King James's time as degenerates who went on board a man-of-war "with as great a grudging as if it were to be slaves in the galleys." A hundred years did not improve matters. The sailors of Queen Anne entered her ships like men "dragged to execution."¹

In the merchant service, where the sailor received his initiation into the art and mystery of the sea, life during the period under review, and indeed for long after, was hard enough in all conscience. Systematic and unspeakably inhuman brutality made the merchant seaman's lot a daily inferno. Traders sailing out of Liverpool, Bristol and a score of other British ports depended almost entirely for their crews upon drugged rum, so evil was their reputation in this respect amongst seafaring men. In the East India Company's ships, even, the conditions were little short of unendurable. Men had rather be hanged than sail to the Indies in them.²

Of all these bitternesses the sailor tasted freely.

¹ Justice, *Dominion and Laws of the Sea*, 1705, Appendix on Pressing.

² *Ad.* I. 1463, 1472—Letters of Captains Boulter and Billingsley, and numerous instances.

Cosmopolite that he was, he wandered far a-sea and incurred the blows and curses of many masters, happy if, amid his manifold tribulations, he could still call his soul his own. Just here, indeed, was where the shoe of naval service pinched him most sorely; for though upon the whole life on board a man-of-war was not many shades worse than life aboard a trader, it yet introduced into his already sadly circumscribed vista of happiness the additional element of absolute loss of free-will, and the additional dangers of being shot as an enemy or hanged as a deserter. These additional things, the littles that yet meant so much, bred in him a hatred of the service so implacable that nothing less drastic than the warrant and the hanger could cope with or subdue it. Eradicated it never was.

The keynote to the sailor's treatment in the Navy may be said to have been profane abuse. Officers of all ranks kept the Recording Angel fearfully busy. With scarcely an exception they were men of blunt speech and rough tongue who never hesitated to call a spade a spade, and the ordinary seaman something many degrees worse. These were technicalities of the service which had neither use nor meaning elsewhere. But to the navigation of the ship, to daily routine and the maintenance of that exact discipline on which the Navy prided itself, they were as essential as is milk to the making of cheese. Nothing could be done without them. Decent language was thrown away upon a set of fellows who had been bred in that very shambles of language, the merchant marine. To them "'twas just all the same as High Dutch." They neither understood it nor appreciated its force. But a volley of thumping oaths, bellowed at them from the brazen throat of a

speaking-trumpet, and freely interlarded with adjectives expressive of the foulness of their persons, and the ultimate state and destination of their eyes and limbs, saved the situation and sometimes the ship. Officers addicted to this necessary flow of language were sensible of only one restraint. Visiting parties caused them embarrassment, and when this was the case they fell back upon the tactics of the commander who, unable to express himself with his usual fluency because of the presence of ladies on the quarter-deck, hailed the foreyard-arm in some such terms as these: "Foreyard-arm there! God bless you! God bless you! God bless you! *You know what I mean!*"

Hard words break no bones, and to quarter-deck language, as such, the sailor entertained no rooted objection. What he did object to, and object to with all the dogged insistence of his nature, was the fact that this habitual flow of profane scurrility was only the prelude to what, with grim pleasantry, he was accustomed to describe as "serving out slops." Anything intended to cover his back was "slops" to the sailor, and the punishments meted out to him covered him like a garment.

The old code of naval laws, the *Monumenta Juridica* or *Black Book* of the Admiralty, contained many curious disciplinary methods, not a few of which too long survived the age they originated in. If, for instance, one sailor robbed another and was found guilty of the crime, boiling pitch was poured over his head and he was powdered with feathers "to mark him," after which he was marooned on the first island the ship fell in with. Seamen guilty of undressing

themselves while at sea were ducked three times from the yard-arm—a more humane use of that spar than converting it into a gallows. On this code were based Admiral the Earl of Lindsay's "Instructions" of 1695. These included ducking, keel-hauling, fasting, flogging, weighting until the "heart or back be ready to break," and "gogging" or scraping the tongue with hoop-iron for obscene or profane swearing; for although the "gentlemen of the quarter-deck" might swear to their heart's content, that form of recreation was strictly taboo in other parts of the ship. Here we have the origin of the brutal discipline of the next century, summed up in the Consolidation Act of George II.¹—an Act wherein ten out of thirty-six articles awarded capital punishment without option, and twelve death or minor penalties.

Of the latter, the one most commonly in use was flogging at the gangway or jears. This duty fell to the lot of the boatswain's mate.² The instrument employed was the cat-o'-nine-tails, the regulation dose twelve lashes; but since the actual number was left to the captain's discretion or malice, as the case might be, it not infrequently ran into three figures. Thus John Watts, able seaman on board H.M.S. *Harwich*, Capt. Andrew Douglas commander, in 1704 received one hundred and seventy lashes for striking a ship-mate in self-defence, his captain meanwhile standing by and exhorting the boatswain's mate to "Swinge the Dog, for hee has a Tough Hide"—and

¹ 22 George II. c. 33.

² "As it is the Custom of the Army to punish with the Drums, so it is the known Practice of the Navy to punish with the Boatswain's Mate."—*Ad. I.* 1482—Capt. (afterwards Admiral) Boscawen, 25 Feb. 1746-7.

that, too, with a cat waxed to make it bite the harder.¹

It was just this unearned increment of blows—that dash of bitter added to the regulation cup—that made Jack's gorge rise. He was not the sort of chap, it must be confessed, to be ruled with a feather. "An impudent rascal" at the best of times, he often "deserved a great deal and had but little."² But unmerited punishment, too often devilishly devised, maliciously inflicted and inhumanly carried out, broke the back of his sense of justice, already sadly overstrained, and inspired him with a mortal hatred of all things naval.

For the slightest offence he was "drubbed at the gears"; for serious offences, from ship to ship. If, when reefing topsails on a dark night or in the teeth of a sudden squall, he did not handle the canvas with all the celerity desired by the officer of the watch, he and his fellow yardsmen were flogged *en bloc*. He was made to run the gauntlet, often with the blood gushing from nose and ears as the result of a previous dose of the cat, until he fell to the deck comatose and at the point of death.³ Logs of wood were bound to his legs as shackles, and whatever the nature of his offence, he invariably began his expiation of it, the preliminary canter, so to speak, in irons. If he had a lame leg or a bad foot, he was "started" with a rope's-end as a "slacker." If he happened to be the last to tumble up when his watch was called,

¹ *Ad.* 1. 5265—Courts-Martial, 1704-5.

² *Ad.* 1. 1472—Capt. Balchen, 26 Jan. 1716-7.

³ *Ad.* 1. 1466—Complaint of y^e Abuse of a Sayler in the *Litchfield*, 1704. In this case the man actually died.

the rattan¹ raised weals on his back or drew blood from his head; and, as if to add insult to injury, for any of these, and a hundred and one other offences, he was liable to be black-listed and to lose his allowance of grog.

Some things, too, were reckoned sins aboard ship which, unhappily for the sailor, could not well be avoided. Laughing, or even permitting the features to relax in a smile in the official presence, was such a sin. "He beats us for laughing," declare the company of the *Solebay*, in a complaint against their commander, "more like Doggs than Men."² One of the *Nymph's* company, in or about the year 1797, received three dozen for what was officially termed "Silent Contempt"—"which was nothing more than this, that when flogged by the boatswain's mate the man smiled."³ This was the "Unpardonable Crime" of the service.

Contrariwise, a man was beaten if he sulked. And as a rule the sailor was sulky enough. Works of supererogation, such as polishing everything polishable—the shot for the guns, in extreme cases, not even excepted—until it shone like the tropical sun at noonday, left him little leisure or inclination for mirth. "Very pretty to look at," said Wellington, when confronted with these glaring evidences of hyper-discipline, "but there is one thing wanting. I have not seen a bright face in the ship."

A painful tale of discipline run mad, or nearly so, is unfolded by that fascinating series of sailor-records,

¹ Carried at one time by both commissioned and warrant officers.

² *Ad. I.* 1435—Capt. Aldred, 29 Feb. 1703-4.

³ *Ad. I.* 5125—Petitions, 1793-7.

the Admiralty Petitions. Many of them, it must in justice be owned, bear unqualified testimony to the kindness and humanity of officers; but in the great majority of cases the evidence they adduce is overwhelmingly to the contrary. And if their language is sometimes bombastic, if their style is almost uniformly illiterate, if they are the productions of a band of mutinous dogs standing out for rights which they never possessed and deserving of a halter rather than a hearing, these are circumstances that do not in the least detract from the veracity of the allegations they advance. The sailor appealed to his king, or to the Admiralty, "the same as a child to its father"; and no one who peruses the story of his wrongs, as set forth in these documents, can doubt for a moment that he speaks the truth with all a child's simplicity.

The seamen of the *Reunion* open the tale of oppression and ill-usage. "Our Captain obliges us to Wash our Linnen twice a week in Salt Water and to put 2 Shirts on every Week, and if they do not look as Clean as if they were washed in Fresh Water, he stops the person's Grog which has the misfortune to displease him; and if our Hair is not Tyd to please him, he orders it to be Cutt Off." On the *Amphitrite* "flogging is their portion." The men of the *Winchelsea* "wold sooner be Shot at like a Targaite than to Remain." The treatment systematically meted out to the *Shannon's* crew is more than the heart "can Cleaverly Bear"—enough, in short, to make them "rise and Steer the Ship into an Enemies Port." The seamen of the *Glory* are made wretched by "beating, blacking, tarring, putting our heads in

Bags," and by being forced to "drink half a Gallon of Salt Water" for the most trivial breaches of discipline or decorum. On the *Blanch*, if they get wet and hang or spread their clothes to dry, the captain "thros them overboard." The *Nassau's* company find it impossible to put the abuse they receive on paper. It is "above Humanity." Though put on board to fight for king and country, they are used worse than dogs. They have no encouragement to "face the Enemy with a chearful Heart." Besides being kept "more like Convicts than free-born Britons," the *Nymph's* company have an unspeakable grievance. "When Engaged with the Enemy off Brest, March the 9th, 1797, they even Beat us at our Quarters, though on the Verge of Eternity."¹

On the principle advanced by Rochefoucault, that there is something not displeasing to us in the misfortunes of our friends, the sailor doubtless derived a sort of negative satisfaction from the fact that he was not the only one on shipboard liable to the pains and penalties of irascibility, brutality and excessive disciplinary zeal. Particularly was this true of his special friend the "sky-pilot" or chaplain, that super-person who perhaps most often fell a victim to quarter-deck ebullitions. Notably there is on record the case of one John Cruickshank, chaplain of H.M.S. *Assurance*, who was clapped in irons, court-martialled and dismissed the service merely because he happened to take—what no sailor could ever condemn him for—a drop too much, and whilst in that condition insisted on preaching to the ship's company when they were on the very point of going

¹ *Ad.* I. 5125—Petitions, 1793-7.

into action.¹ There is also that other case of the "saucy Surgeon of the *Seahorse*," who incurred his captain's dire displeasure all on account of candles, of which necessary articles he, having his wife on board, thought himself entitled to a more liberal share than was consistent with strict naval economy; and who was, moreover, so "troublesome about his Provisions, that if he did not always Chuse out of y^e best in y^e whole Ship," he straightway got his back up and "threatened to Murder the Steward."² Such interludes as these would assuredly have proved highly diverting to the foremast-man had it not been for the cat and that savage litter of minor punishments awaiting the man who smiled.

In the matter of provisions, there can be little doubt that the sailor shared to the full the desire evinced by the surgeon of the *Seahorse* to take blood-vengeance upon someone on account of them. His "belly-timber," as old Misson so aptly if indelicately describes it, was mostly worm-eaten or rotten, his drink indescribably nasty.

Charles II. is said to have made his breakfast off ship's diet the morning he left the *Naseby*, and to have pronounced it good; and Nelson in 1803 declared it "could not possibly be improved upon."³ Such, however, was not the opinion of the chaplain of the *Dartmouth*, for after dining with his captain on an occasion which deserves to become historic, he swore that "although he liked that Sort of Living very well,

¹ *Ad.* I. 5265—Courts-Martial, 1704-5. His zeal was unusual. Most naval chaplains thought "of nothing more than making His Majesty's ships sinecures."

² *Ad.* I. 1470—Capt. Blowers, 3 Jan. 1710-11.

³ *Ad.* I. 580—Memorandum on the State of the Fleet, 1803.

as for the King's Allowance there was but a Sheat of Browne Paper between it and Hell."¹ Which of these opinions came nearest to the truth, the sequel will serve to show.

On the face of it the sailor's dietary was not so bad. A ship's stores, in 1719, included ostensibly such items as bread, wine, beef, pork, peas, oatmeal, butter, cheese, water and beer, and if Jack had but had his fair share of these commodities, and had it in decent condition, he would have had little reason to grumble about the king's allowance. Unhappily for him, the humanities of diet were little studied by the Victualling Board.

Taking the beef, the staple article of consumption on shipboard, cooking caused it to shrink as much as 45 per cent., thus reducing the sailor's allowance by nearly one-half.² The residuum was often "mere carrion," totally unfit for human consumption. "Junk," the sailor contemptuously called it, likening it, in point of texture, digestibility and nutritive properties, to the product of picked oakum, which it in many respects strongly resembled. The pork, though it lost less in the cooking, was rancid, putrid stuff, repellent in odour and colour—particulars in which it found close competitors in the butter and cheese, which had often to be thrown overboard because they "stunk the ship."³ The peas "would not break." Boiled for

¹ *Ad.* 1. 1464—Misdemenors Comited by Mr Edw^d Lewis, Chapling on Board H. M. Shipp Dartm^o, 1 Oct. 1702.

² *Ad.* 1. 1495—Capt. Barrington, 23 Dec. 1770.

³ To disinfect a ship after she had been fouled by putrid rations or disease, burning sulphur and vinegar were commonly employed. Their use was preferable to the means adopted by the carpenter of the *Feversham*, who in order to "sweeten ship" once "turn'd on the cock in the hould" and through forgetfulness "left it running for eighteen

eight hours on end, they came through the ordeal "almost as hard as shott." Only the biscuit, apart from the butter and cheese, possessed the quality of softness. Damp, sea-water, mildew and weevil converted "hard" into "soft tack" and added another horror to the sailor's mess. The water he washed these varied abominations down with was frequently "stuff that beasts would cough at." His beer was no better. It would not keep, and was in consequence both "stinking and sour."¹ Although the contractor was obliged to make oath that he had used both malt and hops in the brewing, it often consisted of nothing more stimulating than "water coloured and bittered," and sometimes the "stingy dog of a brewer" even went so far as to omit the "wormwood."

Such a dietary as this made a meal only an unavoidable part of the day's punishment and inspired the sailor with profound loathing. "Good Eating is an infallible Antidote against murmuring, as many a Big-Belly Place-Man can instance," he says in one of his petitions. Poor fellow! his opportunities of putting it to the test were few enough. On Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays, the so-called Banyan days of the service, when his hateful ration of meat was withheld and in its stead he regaled himself on plum-duff—the "plums," according to an old regulation, "not worse than Malaga"—he had a taste of it. Hence the banyan day, though in reality a fast-day, became indelibly associated in his simple mind and vocabulary

howers," thereby not only endangering the vessel's safety, but incidentally spoiling twenty-one barrels of powder in the magazine.—*Ad.* I. 2653—Capt. Watson, 18 April 1741.

¹ According to Raleigh, old oil and fish casks were used for the storing of ship's beer in Elizabeth's reign.

with occasions of feasting and plenty, and so remains to this day.

If the sailor's only delicacy was duff, his only comforts were rum and tobacco, and to explore some unknown island, and discover therein a goodly river of the famous Jamaica spirit, flowing deep and fragrant between towering mountains of "pig tail," is commonly reputed to have been the cherished wish of his heart. With tobacco the Navy Board did not provide him, nor afford dishonest pursers opportunity to "make dead men chew,"¹ until 1798; but rum they allowed him at a comparatively early date. When sickness prevailed on board, when beer ran short or had to be turned over the side to preserve a sweet ship, rum or wine was issued, and although the Admiralty at first looked askance at the innovation, and at times left commanders of ships to foot the bill for spirits thus served out, the practice made gradual headway, until at length it ousted beer altogether and received the stamp of official approval. Half a pint, dealt out each morning and evening in equal portions, was the regular allowance—a quantity often doubled were the weather unusually severe or the men engaged in the arduous duty of watering ship. At first the ration of rum was served neat and appreciated accordingly; but about 1740 the practice of adding water was introduced. This was Admiral Vernon's doing. Vernon was best known to his men as "Old Grog," a nickname originating in a famous program coat he

¹ Said of pursers who manipulated the Muster Books, which it was part of their duty to keep, in such a way as to make it appear that men "discharged dead" had drawn a larger quantity of tobacco than was actually the case, the difference in value of course going into their own pockets.

affected in dirty weather ; and as the rum and water now served out to them was little to their liking, they marked their disapproval of the mixture, as well as of the man who invented it, by dubbing it "grog." The sailor was not without his sense of humour.

The worst feature of rum, from the sailor's point of view, worse by far than dilution, was the fact that it could be so easily stopped. Here his partiality for the spirit told heavily against him. His grog was stopped because he liked it, rather than because he deserved to lose it. The malice of the thing did not make for a contented ship.

The life of the man-o'-war's-man, according to Lord Nelson, was on an average "finished at forty-five years."¹ Bad food and strenuous labour under exceptionally trying conditions sapped his vitals, made him prematurely old, and exposed him to a host of ills peculiar to his vocation. He "fell down daily," to employ the old formula, in spotted or putrid fevers. He was racked by agues, distorted by rheumatic pains, ruptured or double-ruptured by the strain of pulling, hauling and lifting heavy weights. He ate no meal without incurring the pangs of acute indigestion, to which he was fearfully subject. He was liable to a "prodigious inflammation of the head, nose and eyes," occasioned by exposure. Scurvy, his most inveterate and merciless enemy, "beat up" for him on every voyage and dragged his brine-sodden body down to a lingering death. Or, did he escape these dangers and a watery grave, protracted disease sooner or later rendered him helpless, or a brush with the enemy disabled him for ever from earning his bread.

¹ *Ad.* 1 580—Memorandum on the State of the Fleet, 1803.

His surgeons were, as a rule, a sorry lot. Not only were they deficient in numbers, they commonly lacked both professional training and skill. Their methods were consequently of the crudest description, and long continued so. The approved treatment for rupture, to which the sailor was painfully liable, was to hang the patient up by the heels until the prolapsus was reduced. Pepys relates how he met a seaman returning from fighting the Dutch with his eye-socket "stopped with oakum," and as late at least as the Battle of Trafalgar it was customary, in amputations, to treat the bleeding stump with boiling pitch as a cauterant. In his general attitude towards the sick and wounded the old-time naval surgeon was not unlike Garth, Queen Anne's famous physician. At the Kit Cat Club he one day sat so long over his wine that Steele ventured to remind him of his patients. "No matter," said Garth. "Nine have such bad constitutions that no physician can save them, and the other six such good ones that all the physicans in the world could not kill them."

Many were the devices resorted to in order to keep the man-o'-war's-man healthy and fit. As early as 1602 a magic electuary, invented by one "Doctor Cogbourne, famous for fluxes," was by direction of the Navy Commissioners supplied for his use in the West Indies.¹ By Admiral Vernon and his commanders he was dosed freely with "Elixir of Vitriol," which they not only "reckoned the best general medicine next to rhubarb," but pinned their faith to as a sovereign specific for scurvy and fevers.² Lime-

¹ *Ad. I.* 1464—Capt. Barker, 14 Oct. 1702.

² *Ad. I.* 161—Admiral Vernon, 31 Oct. 1741.

juice, known as a valuable anti-scorbutic as early as the days of Drake and Raleigh, was not added to his rations till 1795. He did not find it very palatable. The secret of fortifying it was unknown, and oil had to be floated on its surface to make it keep. Sour-cROUT was much more to his taste as a preventive of scurvy, and in 1777, at the request of Admiral Montagu, then Governor and Commander-in-Chief over the Island of Newfoundland, the Admiralty caused to be sent out, for the use of the squadron on that station, where vegetables were unprocurable, a sufficient quantity of that succulent preparation to supply twelve hundred men for a period of two months.¹

Rice the sailor detested. Of all species of "soft tack" it was least to his liking. He nicknamed it "strike-me-blind," being firmly convinced that its continued use would rob him of his eyesight. Tea was not added to his dietary till 1824, but as early as 1795 he could regale himself on cocoa. For the rest, sugar, essence of malt, essence of spruce, mustard, cloves, opium and "Jesuits'" or Peruvian bark were considered essential to his well-being on shipboard. He was further allowed a barber—one to every hundred men—without whose attentions it was found impossible to keep him "clean and healthy."

With books he was for many years "very scantily supplied." It was not till 1812, indeed, that the Admiralty, shocked by the discovery that he had practically nothing to elevate his mind but daily association with the quarter-deck, began to pour into the fleet copious supplies of literature for his use.

¹ *Ad.* 1. 471—Admiral Montagu, 28 Feb. 1777, and endorsement.

Thereafter the sailor could beguile his leisure with such books as the *Old Chaplain's Farewell Letter*, Wilson's *Maxims*, *The Whole Duty of Man*, Secker's *Duties of the Sick*, and, lest returning health should dissipate the piety begotten of his ailments, Gibson's *Advice after Sickness*. Thousands of pounds were spent upon this improving literature, which was distributed to the fleet in strict accordance with the amount of storage room available at the various dockyards.¹

A fundamental principle of man-o'-war routine was that the sailor formed no part of it for hospital purposes. Hence sickness was not encouraged. If the sailor-patient did not recover within a reasonable time, he was "put on shore sick," sometimes to the great terror of the populace, who, were he supposed to be afflicted with an infectious disease, fled from him "as if he had the plague."² On shore he was treated for thirty days at his country's charges. If incurable, or permanently disabled, he was then turned adrift and left to shift for himself. A clean record and a sufficiently serious wound entitled him to a small pension or admission to Greenwich Hospital, an institution which had religiously docked his small pay of sixpence a month throughout his entire service. Failing these, there remained for him only the streets and the beggar's rôle.

His pay was far from princely. From 3d. a day in the reign of King John it rose by grudging increments to 20s. a month in 1626, and 24s. in 1797. Years sometimes elapsed before he touched

¹ *Ad.* Accountant-General, Misc. (Various), No 106—Accounts of the Rev. Archdeacon Owen, Chaplain-General to the Fleet, 1812-7.

² *Ad.* 1. 2732—Capt. Young, 24 June 1740.

a penny of his earnings, except in the form of "slop" clothing and tobacco. Amongst the instances of deferred wages in which the Admiralty records abound, there may be cited the case of the *Dreadnought*, whose men in 1711 had four years' pay due; and of the *Dunkirk*, to whose company, in the year following, six and a half years' was owing.¹ And at the time of the Nore Mutiny it was authoritatively stated that there were ships then in the fleet which had not been paid off for eight, ten, twelve and in one instance even fifteen years. "Keep the pay, keep the man," was the policy of the century—a sadly mistaken policy, as we shall presently see.

In another important article of contentment the sailor was hardly better off. The system of deferred pay amounted practically to a stoppage of all leave for the period, however protracted, during which the pay was withheld. Thus the *Monmouth's* men had in 1706 been in the ship "almost six years, and had never had the opportunity of seeing their families but once."² In Boscawen's ship, the *Dreadnought*, there were in 1744 two hundred and fifty men who "had not set foot on shore near two year." Admiral Penrose once paid off in a seventy-four at Plymouth, many of whose crew had "never set foot on land for six or seven years";³ and Brenton, in his *Naval History*, instances the case of a ship whose company, after having been eleven years in the East Indies, on returning to England were drafted straightway into

¹ *Ad. I.* 1470—Capt. Bennett, 8 March 1710-11. *Ad. I.* 1471—Capt. Butler, 19 March, 1711-12.

² *Ad. I.* 1468—Capt. Baker, 3 Nov. 1706.

³ Penrose (Sir V. C., Vice-Admiral of the Blue), *Observations on Corporeal Punishment, Impressment, etc.*, 1824.

another ship and sent back to that quarter of the globe without so much as an hour's leave ashore.

What was true of pay and leave was also true of prize-money. The sailor was systematically kept out of it, and hence out of the means of enjoyment and carousal it afforded him, for inconscionable periods. From a moral point of view the check was hardly to his detriment. But the Navy was not a school of morals, and withholding the sailor's hard-earned prize-money over an indefinite term of years neither made for a contented heart nor enhanced his love for a service that first absorbed him against his will, and then, having got him in its clutches, imposed upon and bested him at every turn.

Although the prime object in withholding his pay was to prevent his running from his ship, so far from compassing that desirable end it had exactly the contrary effect. Both the preventive and the disease were of long standing. With De Ruyter in the Thames in 1667, menacing London and the kingdom, the seamen of the fleet flocked to town in hundreds, clamouring for their wages, whilst their wives besieged the Navy Office in Seething Lane, shrieking: "This is what comes of not paying our husbands!"

Essentially a creature of contradictions, the sailor rarely, if he could avoid it, steered the course laid down for him, and in nothing perhaps was this idiosyncrasy so glaringly apparent as in his behaviour as his country's creditor. He "would get to London if he could."¹ "An unaccountable humour" impelled him "to quit His Majesty's service without leave."²

¹ *Ad. I.* 2732—Capt. Young, 12 Dec. 1742.

² *Ad. I.* 480—Shirley, Governor of Massachusetts, 12 Sept. 1746.

Once the whim seized him, no ties of deferred pay or prize-money had power to hold him back. The one he could obtain on conditions; the other he could dispose of at a discount which, though ruinously heavy, still left him enough to frolic on.

The weapon of deferred pay was thus a two-edged one. If it hurt the sailor, it also cut the fingers of those who employed it against him. So exigent were the needs of the service, he could "run" with impunity. For if he ran whilst his pay was in arrears, he did so with the full knowledge that, barring untimely recapture by the press-gang, he would receive a free pardon, together with payment of all dues, on the sole condition, which he never kept if he could help it, of returning to his ship when his money was gone. He therefore deserted for two reasons: First, to obtain his pay; second, to spend it.

The penalty for desertion, under a well-known statute of George I.,¹ was death by hanging. As time went on, however, discipline in this respect suffered a grave relapse, and fear of the halter no longer served to check the continual exodus from the fleet. If the runaway sailor were taken, "it would only be a whipping bout." So he openly boasted.² The "bout," it is true, at times ran to six, or even seven hundred lashes—the latter being the heaviest dose of the cat ever administered in the British navy;³ but even this terrible ordeal had no power to hold the sailor to his duty, and although Admiral Lord St. Vincent, better known in his day as "hanging Jervis," did his

¹ 13 George I., art. 7.

² *Ad.* 1. 1479—Capt. Boscawen, 26 April 1743.

³ *Ad.* 1. 482—Admiral Lord Colvill, 12 Nov. 1765.

utmost to revive the ancient custom of stretching the sailor's neck, the trend of the times was against him, and within twenty-five years of the reaffirming of the penalty, in the 22nd year of George II., hanging for desertion had become practically obsolete.

In the declining days of the practice a grim game at life and death was played upon the deck of a king's ship lying in the River St. Lawrence. The year was 1760. Quebec had only recently fallen before the British onslaught. A few days before that event, at a juncture when every man in the squadron was counted upon to play his part in the coming struggle, and to play it well, three seamen, James Mike, Thomas Wilkinson and William M'Millard by name, deserted from the *Vanguard*. Retaken some months later, they were brought to trial; but as men were not easy to replace in that latitude, the court, whilst sentencing all three to suffer the extreme penalty of the law, added to their verdict a rider to the effect that it would be good policy to spare two of them. Admiral Lord Colvill, then Commander-in-Chief, issued his orders accordingly, and at eleven o'clock on the morning of the 12th of July the condemned men, preceded to the scaffold by two chaplains, were led to the *Vanguard's* forecastle, where they drew lots to determine which of them should die. The fatal lot fell to James Mike, who, in presence of the assembled boats of the squadron, was immediately "turned off" at the foreyard-arm.¹

Encouraged in this grim fashion, desertion assumed alarming proportions. Nelson estimated that when-

¹ *Ad. I.* 482—Admiral Lord Colvill, 10 July 1760; Captains' Logs, 1026—Log of H.M.S. *Vanguard*.

ever a large convoy of merchant ships assembled at Portsmouth, at least a thousand men deserted from the fleet.¹ This was a "liberty they would take," do what you could to prevent it.

Of those who thus deserted fully one-third, according to the same high authority, never saw the fleet again. "From loss of clothes, drinking and other debaucheries" they were "lost by death to the country." Some few of the remainder, after drinking His Majesty's health in a final bowl, voluntarily returned on board and "prayed for a fair wind"; but the majority held aloof, taking their chances and their pleasures in sailorly fashion until, their last stiver gone, they fell an easy prey to the press-gang or the crimp.

While the crimp was to the merchant service what the press-gang was to the Navy, a kind of universal provider, there was in his method of preying upon the sailor a radical difference. Like his French compeer, the recruiting sergeant of the Pont Neuf in the days of Louis the Well-Beloved, wherever sailors congregated the crimp might be heard rattling his money-bags and crying: "Who wants any? Who wants any?" Where the press-gang used the hanger or the cudgel, the crimp employed dollars. The circumstance gave him a decided "pull" in the contest for men, for the dollars he offered, whether in the way of pay or bounty, were invariably fortified with rum. The two formed a contraption no sailor could resist. "Money and liquor held out to a seaman," said Nelson, "are too much for him."

In law the offence of enticing seamen to desert His Majesty's service, like desertion itself, was punish-

¹ *Ad.* 1. 580—Memorandum on the State of the Fleet, 1803.

able with death;¹ but in fact the penalty was either commuted to imprisonment, or the offender was dealt with summarily, without invoking the law. Crimps who were caught red-handed had short shrift. Two of the fraternity, named respectively Henry Nathan and Sampson Samuel, were once taken in the Downs. "Send Nathan and Samuel," ran the Admiralty order in their case, "to Plymouth by the first conveyance. Admiral Young is to order them on board a ship going on foreign service as soon as possible." Another time an officer, boarding a boat filled with men as it was making for an Indiaman at Gravesend, found in her six crimps, all of whom suffered the same fate.²

Men seduced by means of crimpage bounty were said to be "silver cooped," and the art of silver cooping was not only practised at home, it was world-wide. In whatever waters a British man-o'-war cast anchor, there the crimp appeared, plying his crafty trade. His assiduity paid a high compliment to the sterling qualities of the British seaman, but for the Navy it spelt wholesale depletion.

In home ports he was everywhere in evidence. No ship of war could lie in Leith Roads but she lost a good part of her crew through his seductions. "M'Kirdy & M'Lean, petty-fogging writers," were the chief crimps at Greenock. Sheerness crimps gave "great advance money." Liverpool was infested with them, all the leading merchant shippers at Bristol, London and other great ports having "agents" there,

¹ 22 George II. cap. 33.

² *Ad.* I. 1542—Capt. Bazeley, 7 Feb. 1808. *Ad.* I. 1513—Capt. Bowater, 12 June 1796.

who offered the man-o'-war's-man tempting bounties and substantial wages to induce him to desert his ship. A specially active agent of Bristol shipowners was one Vernon Ley, who plied his trade chiefly at Exeter and Plymouth, whence he was known to send to Bristol, in the space of six months, as many as seventy or eighty men, whom he provided with post-chaises for the journey and £8 per man as bounty. James White, a publican who kept the "Pail of Barm" at Bedminster, made a close second in his activity and success. Spithead had its regular contingent of crimps, and many an East India ship sailing from that famous anchorage was "entirely manned" by their efforts, of course at the expense of the ships of war lying there. At Chatham, crimpage bounty varied from fifteen to twenty guineas per head; and at Cork, a favourite recruiting ground for both merchantmen and privateers, the same sum could be had any day, with high wages to boot.

In the Crown Colonies a similar state of things prevailed. Queen's ships visiting Jamaica in or about the year 1716 lost so heavily they scarce dared venture the return voyage to England, their men having "gone a-wrecking" in the Gulf of Florida, where one armed sloop was reputed to have recovered Spanish treasure to the value of a hundred thousand dollars.¹ Time did not lessen desertion in the island, though it wrought a change in the cause. When Admiral Vernon was Commander-in-Chief there in the forties, he lost five hundred men within a comparatively short time—"seduced out," to use his own words, "through the temptations of high wages and thirty gallons of

¹ *Ad. I.* 1471—Capt. Balchen, 13 May 1716.

rum, and conveyed drunk on board from the punch-houses where they are seduced.”¹

At Louisberg, in the Island of Cape Breton, the North American Squadron in 1746 lost so many men through the seductions practised by New England skippers frequenting that port, that Townsend, the admiral in command, indited a strongly worded protest to Shirley, then Governor of Massachusetts; but the latter, though deploring the “vile behaviour” of the skippers in question, could do nothing to put a stop to it.² As a matter of fact he did not try.

On the coast of Carolina many of the English merchantmen in 1743 paid from seventeen to twenty guineas for the run home, and in addition “as many pounds of Sugar, Gallons of Rum and pounds of Tobacco as pounds in Money.”³

The lust for privateering had much to answer for in this respect. So possessed were the Virginians by the desire to get rich at the expense of their enemies that they quite “forgot their allegiance to the King.” By the offer of inordinately high wages and rich prizes they did their utmost to seduce carpenters, gunners, sailmakers and able seamen from His Majesty’s ships.⁴ Any ship forced to winter at Rhode Island, again, always counted upon losing enough men to “disable her from putting to sea” when the spring came. Here, too, the privateering spirit was to

¹ *Ad. I.* 233—Admiral Vernon, 5 Sept. 1742. A rare recruiting sheet of 1780, which has for its headpiece a volunteer shouting: “Rum for nothing!” describes Jamaica as “that delightful Island, abounding in Rum, Sugar and Spanish Dollars, where there is delicious living and plenty of GROGG and PUNCH.”

² *Ad. I.* 480—Townsend, 17 Aug.; Shirley, 12 Sept. 1746.

³ *Ad. I.* 1479—Capt. Bladwell, 1 July 1743

⁴ *Ad. I.* 1480—Capt. Lord Alexander Banff, 21 Oct. 1744.

blame, Rhode Island being notorious for its enterprise in that form of piracy. Another impenitent sinner in her inroads upon the companies of king's ships was Boston, where "a sett of people made it their Business" to entice them away.¹ No ship could clean, refit, victual or winter there without "the loss of all her men." Capt. Young, of the *Jason*, was in 1753 left there with never a soul on board except "officers and servants, widows' men, the quarter-deck gentlemen and those called idlers." The rest had been seduced at £30 per head.²

So it went on. Day in, day out, at home and abroad, this ceaseless drain of men, linking hands in the decimation of the fleet with those able adjutants Disease and Death, accentuated progressively and enormously the naval needs of the country. For the apprehension and return of deserters from ships in home ports a drag-net system of rewards and conduct-money sprang into being; but this the sailor to some extent contrived to elude. He "stuck a cockade in his hat" and made shift to pass for a soldier on leave; or he laid furtive hands on a horse and set up for an equestrian traveller. In the neighbourhood of all great seaport towns, as on all main roads leading to that paradise and ultimate goal of the deserter, the metropolis, horse-stealing by sailors "on the run" prevailed to an alarming extent; and although there was a time when the law strung him up for the crime of borrowing horses to help him on his way, as it had

¹ *Ad.* I. 1440—Capt. Askew, 27 Aug. 1748.

² *Ad.* I. 2732—Capt. Young, 6 Oct. 1753. The "widows' men" here humorously alluded to would not add much to the effectiveness of the depleted company. They were imaginary sailors, borne on the ship's books for pay and prize-money which went to Greenwich Hospital.

once hanged him for deserting, the naval needs of the country eventually changed all that and brought him a permanent reprieve. Thenceforth, instead of sending the happy-go-lucky, devil-may-care felon to the gallows, they turned him over to the press-gang and so re-consigned him, penniless and protesting, to the duty he detested.

CHAPTER III

WHAT THE PRESS-GANG WAS

FROM the standpoint of a systematic supply of men to the fleet, the press-gang was a legitimate means to an imperative end. This was the official view. In how different a light the people came to regard the petty man-trap of power, we shall presently see.

Designed as it was for the taking up of able-bodied adults, the main idea in the formation of the gang was strength and efficiency. It was accordingly composed of the stoutest men procurable, dare-devil fellows capable of giving a good account of themselves in fight, or of carrying off their unwilling prey against long odds. Brute strength combined with animal courage being thus the first requisite of the ganger, it followed—not perhaps as a matter of course so much as a matter of fact—that his other qualities were seldom such as to endear him to the people. Wilkes denounced him for a “lawless ruffian,” and one of the newspapers of his time describes him, with commendable candour and undeniable truth, as a “profligate and abandoned wretch, perpetually lounging about the streets and incessantly vomiting out oaths and horrid curses.”¹

The getting of a gang together presented little

¹ *London Chronicle*, 16 March 1762.

difficulty. The first business of the officer charged with its formation was to find suitable quarters, rent not to exceed twenty shillings a week, inclusive of fire and candle. Here he hung out a flag as the sign of authority and a bait for volunteers. As a rule, they were easily procurable. All the roughs of the town were at his disposal, and when these did not yield material enough recourse was had to beat of drum, that instrument, together with the man who thumped it, being either hired at half-a-crown a day or "loaned" from the nearest barracks. Selected members of the crowd thus assembled were then plied with drink "to invite them to enter"—an invitation they seldom refused.

It goes without saying that gangs raised in this manner were of an exceedingly mixed character. On the principle of setting a thief to catch a thief, seafaring men of course had first preference, but landsmen were by no means excluded. The gang operating at Godalming in 1782 may be cited as typical of the average inland gang. It consisted of three farmers, one weaver, one bricklayer, one labourer, and two others whose regular occupations are not divulged. They were probably sailors.¹

Landsmen entered on the express understanding that they should not be pressed when the gang broke up. Sailor gangsmen, on the contrary, enjoyed no such immunity. The most they could hope for, when their arduous duties came to an end, was permission to "choose their ship." The concession was no mean one. By choosing his ship discreetly the gangsmen avoided encounters with men he had pressed,

¹ *Ad. I.* 1502—Capt. Boston, Report on Rendezvous, 1782.

thus preserving his head unbroken and his skin intact.

Ship-gangs, unlike those operating on land, were composed entirely of seamen. For dash, courage and efficiency, they had no equal and few rivals.

Apart from the officers commanding it, the number of men that went to the making of a gang varied from two to twenty or more according to the urgency of the occasion that called it into being and the importance or ill-repute of the centre selected as the scene of its operations. For Edinburgh and Leith twenty-one men, directed by a captain, two lieutenants and four midshipmen, were considered none too many. Greenock kept the same number of officers and twenty men fully employed, for here there was much visiting of ships on the water, a fast cutter being retained for that purpose. The Liverpool gang numbered eighteen men, directed by seven officers and backed by a flotilla of three tenders, each under the command of a special lieutenant. Towns such as Newcastle-upon-Tyne, Great Yarmouth, Cowes and Haverfordwest also had gangs of at least twenty men each, with boats as required; and Deal, Dover and Folkstone five gangs between them, totalling fifty men and fifteen officers, and employing as many boats as gangs for pressing in the Downs.

In the case of ship-gangs, operating directly from a ship of war in harbour or at sea, the officers in charge were as a matter of course selected from the available ward- or gun-room contingent. Few, if any, of the naval men whose names at one time or another spring into prominence during the century,



MANNING THE NAVY.

escaped this unpleasant but necessary duty in their younger days. But on shore an altogether different order of things prevailed.

The impress service ashore was essentially the grave of promotion. Whether through age, fault, misfortune or lack of influence in high places, the officers who directed it were generally disappointed men, service derelicts whose chances of ever sporting a second "swab," or of again commanding a ship, had practically vanished. Naval men afloat spoke of them with good-natured contempt as "Yellow Admirals," the fictitious rank denoting a kind of service quarantine that knew no pratique.

Like the salt junk of the foremast-man, the Yellow Admiral got fearfully "out of character" through over-keeping. With the service he lost all touch save in one degrading particular. His pay was better than his reputation, but his position was isolated, his duties and his actions subject to little official supervision. With opportunity came peculiar temptations to bribery and peculation, and to these he often succumbed. The absence of congenial society frequently weighed heavy upon him and drove him to immoderate drinking. Had he lived a generation or so later the average impress officer ashore could have echoed with perfect truth, and almost nightly iteration, the crapulous sentiment in which Byron is said to have toasted his hosts when dining on board H.M.S. *Hector* at Malta:—

"Glorious Hector, son of Priam,
Was ever mortal drunk as I am!"¹

¹ The authenticity of the anecdote, notwithstanding the fact that it was long current in naval circles, is more than doubtful. When

A lieutenant attached to the gang at Chester is responsible for a piece of descriptive writing, of a biographical nature, which perhaps depicts the impress officer of the century at his worst. Addressing a brother lieutenant at Waterford, to which station his superior was on the point of being transferred, "I think but right," says he, "to give you a character of Capt. P., who is to be your Regulating Captain. I have been with him six months here, and if it had not been that he is leaving the place, I should have wrote to the Board of Admiralty to have been removed from under his command. At first you'll think him a Fine old Fellow, but if it's possible he will make you Quarrel with all your Acquaintance. Be very Careful not to Introduce him to any Family that you have a regard for, for although he is near Seventy Years of Age, he is the greatest Debauchee you ever met with—a Man of No Religion, a Man who is Capable of any Meanness, Arbitrary and Tyrannicall in his Disposition. This City has been several times just on the point of writing against him to the Board of Admiralty. He has a wife, and Children grown up to Man's Estate. The Woman he brings over with him is Bird the Builder's Daughter. To Conclude, there is not a House in Chester that he can go into but his own and the Rendezvous, after having been Six Months in one of the agreeablest Cities in England." ¹

Bryon visited Malta in 1808 the *Hector* was doing duty at Plymouth as a prison-ship, and naval records disclose no other ship of that name till 1864.

¹ *Ad.* 1. 1500—Lieut. Shuckford, 7 March 1780.

Ignorant of the fact that his reputation had thus preceded him, Capt. P. found himself assailed, on his arrival at Waterford, by a "most Infamous Epitaph," emanating none knew whence, nor cared. This circumstance, accentuated by certain indiscretions of which the hectoring old officer was guilty shortly after his arrival, aroused strong hostility against him. A mob of fishwives, attacking his house at Passage, smashed the windows and were with difficulty restrained from levelling the place with the ground. His junior officers conspired against him. Piqued by the loss of certain perquisites which the newcomer remorselessly swept away, they denounced him to the Admiralty, who ordered an inquiry into his conduct. After a hearing of ten days it went heavily against him, practically every charge being proved. He was immediately superseded and never again employed—a sad ending to a career of forty years under such men as Anson, Boscawen, Hawke and Vernon.¹ Yet such was the ultimate fate of many an impress officer. A stronger light focussed him ashore, and habits, proclivities and weaknesses that escaped censure at sea, were here projected odiously upon the sensitive retina of public opinion.

Of the younger men who drifted into the shore service there were some, it need scarcely be said, who for obvious reasons escaped, or, rather, did not succumb to the common odium. A notable example of this type of officer was Capt. Jahleel Brenton, who for some years commanded the gangs at Leith and

¹ *Ad. I.* 1500—Capt. Bennett, 13 Nov. 1780, and enclosures constituting the inquiry.

Greenock. Though a man of blunt sensibilities and speech, he possessed qualities which carried him out of the stagnant back-water of pressing into the swim of service afloat, where he eventually secured a baronetcy and the rank of Vice-Admiral. Singularly enough, he was American-born.

The senior officer in charge of a gang, commonly known as the Regulating Captain, might in rank be either captain or lieutenant. It was his duty to hire, but not to "keep" the official headquarters of the gang, to organise that body, to direct its operations, to account for all moneys expended and men pressed, and to "regulate" or inspect the latter and certify them fit for service or otherwise. In this last-named duty a surgeon often assisted him, usually a local practitioner, who received a shilling a head for his pains. One or more lieutenants, each of whom had one or more midshipmen at his beck and call, served under the Regulating Captain. They "kept" the headquarters and led the gang, or contingents of the gang, on pressing forays, thus coming in for much of the hard work, and many of the harder knocks, that unpopular body was liable to. Sometimes, as in the case of Dover, Deal and Folkestone, several gangs were grouped under a single regulating officer.

The pay of the Regulating Captain was £1 a day, with an additional 5s. subsistence money. Lieutenants received their usual service pay, and for subsistence 3s. 6d. In special cases grants were made for coach-hire¹ and such purposes as "enter-

¹ Capt. William Bennett's bill for the double journey between Waterford and Cork, on the occasion of the inquiry into the conduct of the Regulating Officer at the former place, over which he presided,

tainments to the Mayor and Corporation, the Magistrates and the Officers of the Regulars and the Militia, by way of return for their civilities and for their assistance in carrying on the impress." The grant to the Newcastle officers, under this head, in 1763 amounted to upwards of £93.¹

"Road-money" was generally allowed at the rate of 3d. a mile for officers and 1d. a mile for gangers when on the press; but as a matter of fact these modest figures were often largely exceeded—to the no small emolument of the regulating officer. Lieut. Gaydon, commanding at Ilfracombe, in 1795 debited the Navy Board with a sum of £148 for 1776 miles of travel; Capt. Gibbs, of Swansea, with £190 for 1561 miles; and Capt. Longcroft, of Haverfordwest, with £524 for 8388 miles—a charge characterised by Admiral M'Bride, who that year reported upon the working of the impress, as "immense."² He might well have used a stronger term.

An item which it was at one time permissible to charge, possesses a special interest. This was a bonus of 1s. a head on all men pressed—a bonus that was in reality nothing more than the historic prest shilling of other days, now no longer paid to pressed men, amounted to forty-three guineas—a sum he considered "as moderate as any gentleman's could have been, laying aside the wearing of my uniform every day." Half the amount went in chaise and horse hire, "there being," we are told, "no chaises upon the road as in England," and "only one to be had at Cork, all the rest being gone to Dublin with the Lawyers and the Players, the Sessions being just ended and the Play House broke up" (*Ad.* 1. 1503—Capt. Bennett, 24 March 1782). Nelson's bill for posting from Burnham, Norfolk, to London and back, 260 miles, in the year 1789, amounted to £19, 5s. 2d. (*Ad.* Victualling Dept., Miscellaneous, No. 26).

¹ *Ad.* 1. 1493—Capt. Bover, 6 March 1763, and endorsement.

² *Ad.* 1. 1579—Admiral M'Bride, 19 March 1795.

diverted into the pockets of those who did the pressing. The practice, however, was short-lived. Tending as it did to fill the ships with unserviceable men, it was speedily discontinued and the historic shilling made over to the certifying surgeon.

The shore midshipman could boast but little affinity with his namesake of the quarter-deck. John Richards, midshipman of the Godalming gang, had never in his life set foot on board a man-of-war or been to sea. His age was forty. The case of James Good, of Hull, is even more remarkable. He had served as "Midshipman of the Impress" for thirty years out of sixty-three.¹ The pay of these elderly youths at no time exceeded a guinea a week.

The gangsmen were more variously, if not more generously remunerated. At Deal, in 1743, he had 1s. per day for his boat, and "found himself," or, in the alternative, "ten shillings for every good seaman procured, in full for his trouble and the hire of the boat." At Dover, in 1776, he received 2s. 6d. a day; at Godalming, six years later, 10s. 6d. a week; and at Exeter, during the American War of Independence, when the demand for seamen was phenomenal, 14s. a week, 5s. for every man pressed, and clothing and shoes "when he deserved it." Pay and allowances were thus far from uniform. Both depended largely upon the scarcity or abundance of suitable gangsmen, the demand for seamen, and the astuteness of the officer organising the gang. Some gangs not on regular wages received as much as "twenty shillings for each man impressed, and six-

¹ *Ad. I.* 1455—Capt. Acklom, 6 Oct. 1814. *Ad. I.* 1502—Capt. Boston, Report on Rendezvous, 1782.

pence a mile for as many miles as they could make it appear each man had travelled, not exceeding twenty, besides (a noteworthy addition) the twelve-pence press-money"; but if a man pressed under these conditions were found to be unserviceable after his appearance on shipboard, all money considerations for his capture were either withheld or recalled. On the whole, considering the arduous and disagreeable nature of the gangsmen's calling, the Navy Board cannot be accused of dealing any too generously by him.

"If ever you intend to man the fleet without being cheated by the captains and pursers," Charles II. is credited with having once said to his council, "you may go to bed." What in this sense was true of the service afloat was certainly not less true of that loosely organised and laxly supervised naval department, the impress ashore. Considering the repute of the officers engaged in it, and the opportunities they enjoyed for speculation and the taking of bribes—considering, above all, the extreme difficulty of keeping a watchful eye upon officers scattered throughout the length and breadth of the land, the wonder is, not that irregularities crept in, but that they should have been, upon the whole, so few and so venial.

To allow the gangsmen to go fishing for sea-fish or dredging for oysters, as was commonly done when there was little prospect of a catch on land, was no more heinous than the custom prevailing—to everybody's knowledge—at King's Lynn in Norfolk, where the gang had no need to go a-fishing because, regularly as the cobbles came in, the midshipman attached to the gang appeared on the quay and had the "insolence to demand Three of the Best Fysh for

the Regulating Captain, the Lieutenant and himself.”¹ And if, again, rating a gangster in choicest quarter-deck language were no serious offence, why should not the Regulating Captain rate his son as midshipman, even though “not proper to be employed as such.” And similarly, granting it to be right to earn half a sovereign by pressing a man contrary to law, where was the wrong in “clearing him of the impress” for the same amount, as was commonly done by the middies at Sunderland and Shields.² These were works of supererogation rather than sins against the service, and little official notice was taken of them unless, as in the case of Liverpool, they were carried to such lengths as to create a public scandal.³

There were, as a matter of course, some officers in the service who went far beyond the limits of such venial irregularities and, like Falstaff, “misused the king’s press damnably.” Though according to the terms of their warrant they were “to take care not to demand or receive any money, gratuity, reward, or any other consideration whatsoever for the sparing, exchanging or discharging any person or persons impressed or to be impressed,” the taking of “gratifications” for these express purposes prevailed to a notorious extent. The difficulty was to fasten the offence upon the offenders. “Bailed men,” as they were called, did not “peach.” Their immunity from the press was too dearly bought to admit of their indulging personal animus against the officer who

¹ *Ad. I.* 1546—Petition of the Owners of the Fishing Cobles of Lynn, 3 March 1809.

² *Ad. I.* 1557—Capt. Bell, 27 June 1806, enclosure.

³ *Ad. I.* 579—Admiral Child, 30 Jan. 1800.

had taken their money. It was only through some tangle of circumstance over which the delinquent had no control that the truth leaked out. Such a case was that of the officer in command of the *Mary* tender at Sunderland, a lieutenant of over thirty years' standing. Having pressed one Michael Dryden, a master's mate whom he ought never to have pressed at all, he so far "forgot" himself as to accept a bribe of £15 for the man's release, and then, "having that day been dining with a party of military officers," forgot to release the man. The double lapse of memory proved his ruin. Representations were made to the Admiralty, and the unfortunately constituted lieutenant was "broke" and black-listed.¹

Another species of fraud upon which the Admiralty was equally severe, was that long practised with impunity by a certain regulating officer at Poole. Not only did he habitually put back the dates on which men were pressed, thus "bearing" them for subsistence money they never received, he made it a further practice to enter on his books the names of fictitious pressed men who opportunely "escaped" after adding their quota to his dishonest perquisites. So general was misappropriation of funds by means of this ingenious fraud that detection was deservedly visited with instant dismissal.²

Though to the gangster all things were reputedly lawful, some things were by no means expedient. He could with impunity deprive almost any able-bodied adult of his freedom, and he could sometimes,

¹ *Ad.* I. 2740—Lieut. Atkinson, 24 June 1798, and endorsement.

² *Ad.* I. 1526—Capt. Boyle, 2 Oct. 1801, and endorsement.

with equal impunity, add to his scanty earnings by restoring that freedom for a consideration in coin of the realm; but when, like Josh Cooper, sometime gangster at Hull, he extended his prerogative to the occupants of hen-roosts, he was apt to find himself at cross-purposes with the law as interpreted by the sitting magistrates.

Amongst less questionable perquisites accruing to the gangster two only need be mentioned here. One was the "straggling-money" paid to him for the apprehension of deserters—20s. for every deserter taken, with "conduct" money to boot; the other, the anker of brandy designedly thrown overboard by smugglers when chased by a gang engaged in pressing afloat. Occasionally the brandy checked the pursuit; but more often it gave an added zest to the chase and so hastened the capture of the fugitive donors.

To the unscrupulous outsider the opportunities for illicit gain afforded by the service made an irresistible appeal. Sham gangs and make-believe press-masters abounded, thriving exceedingly upon the fears and credulity of the people until capture put a term to their activities and sent them to the pillory, the prison or the fleet they pretended to cater for.

Their mode of operation seldom varied. They pressed a man, and then took money for "discharging" him; or they threatened to press and were bought off. One Philpot was in 1709 fined ten nobles and sentenced to the pillory for this fraud. He had many imitators, amongst them John Love, who posed as a midshipman, and William Moore,

his gangsmen, both of whom were eventually brought to justice and turned over to His Majesty's ships.

The rôle adopted by these last-named pretenders was a favourite one with men engaged in crimping for the merchant service. Shrewsbury in 1780 received a visit from one of these individuals—"a Person named Hopkins, who appeared in a Lieutenant's Uniform and committed many fraudulent Actions and Scandalous Abuses in raising Men," as he said, "for the Navy." Two months later another impostor of the same type appeared at Birmingham, where he scattered broadcast a leaflet, headed with the royal arms and couched in the following seductive terms: "Eleven Pounds for every Able Seaman, Five Pounds for every ordinary Seaman, and Three Pounds for every Able-bodied Landsman, exclusive of a compleat set of Sea Clothing, given by the Marine Society. All Good Seamen, and other hearty young Fellows of Spirit, that are willing to serve on board any of His Majesty's Vessels or Ships of War, Let them with Chearfulness repair to the Sailors' Head Rendezvous in this Town, where a proper Officer attends, who will give them every encouragement they can desire. Now my Jolly Lads is the time to fill your Pockets with Dollars, Double Doubloons & Luidores. Conduct Money allowed, Chest and Bedding sent Carriage Free." Soon after, the two united forces at Coventry, whither Capt. Beecher desired to "send a party to take them," but to this request the Admiralty turned a deaf ear. In their opinion the game was not worth the candle.¹

Ex-midshipman Rookhad, who when dismissed

¹ *Ad.* 1. 1500—Letters of Capt. Beecher, 1780.

the service took to boarding vessels in the Thames and extorting money and liquor from the masters as a consideration for not pressing their men, did not escape so lightly. Him the Admiralty prosecuted.¹

It was in companies, however, that the sham ganger most frequently took the road, for numbers not only enhanced his chances of obtaining money, they materially diminished the risk of capture. One such gang was composed of "eighteen desperate villians," who were nevertheless taken. Another, a "parcel of fellows armed with cutlasses like a press-gang," appeared at Dublin in 1743, where they boldly entered public-houses on pretence of looking for sailors, and there extorted money and drink. What became of them we are not told; but in the case of the pretended gang whose victim, after handing over two guineas as the price of his release, was pressed by a regularly constituted gang, we learn the gratifying sequel. The real gang gave chase to the sham gang and pressed every man of them.

According to the "Humble Petition of Grace Blackmore of Stratford le Bow, widow," on Friday the 29th of May, in an unknown year of Queen Anne's reign, "there came to Bow ffaire severall pretended pressmasters, endeavouring to impress." A tumult ensued. Murder was freely "cryed out," apparently with good reason, for in the mêlée petitioner's husband, then constable of Bow, was "wounded soe that he shortly after dyed."²

There were occasions when the sham gang

¹ *Ad. 7. 298*—Law Officers' Opinions, 1733-56, No. 12. Process was by information in the Court of King's Bench, for a misdemeanour.

² *State Papers Domestic*, Anne, xxxvi. No. 17.

operated under cover of a real press-warrant, and for this the Admiralty was directly to blame. It had become customary at the Navy Office to send out warrants, whether to commanders of ships or to Regulating Captains, in blank, the person to whom the warrant was directed filling in the name for himself. Such warrants were frequently stolen and put to irregular uses, and of this a remarkable instance occurred in 1755.

In that year one Nicholas Cooke, having by some means obtained possession of such a warrant, "filled up the blank thereof by directing it to himself, by the name and description of Lieutenant Nicholas Cooke, tho' in truth not a Lieutenant nor an Officer in His Majesty's Navy," hired a vessel—the *Providence* snow of Dublin—and in her cruised the coasts of Ireland, pressing men. After thus raising as many as he could carry, he shaped his course for Liverpool, no doubt intending, on his arrival at that port, to sell his unsuspecting victims to the merchant ships in the Mersey at so much a head. Through bad seamanship, however, the vessel was run aground at Seacombe, opposite to Liverpool, and Capt. Darby, of H.M.S. *Seahorse*, perceiving her plight, and thinking to render assistance in return for perhaps a man or two, took boat and rowed across to her. To his astonishment he found her full of Irishmen to the number of seventy-three, whom he immediately pressed and removed to his own ship. The circumstance of the false warrant now came to light, and with it another, of worse omen for the mock lieutenant. In the hold a quantity of undeclared spirits was discovered, and this fact afforded the Admiralty a handle they were

not slow to avail themselves of. They put the Excise Officers on the scent, and Cooke was prosecuted for smuggling.¹

The most successful sham gang ever organised was perhaps that said to have been got together by a trio of mischievous Somerset girls. The scene of the exploit was the Denny-Bowl quarry, near Taunton. The quarrymen there were a hard-bitten set and great braggarts, openly boasting that no gang dare attack them, and threatening, in the event of so unlikely a contingency, to knock the gangsmen on the head and bury them in the rubbish of the pit. There happened to be in the neighbouring town "three merry maids," who heard of this tall talk and secretly determined to put the vaunted courage of the quarrymen to the test. They accordingly dressed themselves in men's clothing, stuck cockades in their hats, and with hangers under their arms stealthily approached the pit. Sixty men were at work there; but no sooner did they catch sight of the supposed gang than they one and all threw down their tools and ran for their lives.

Officially known as the Rendezvous, a French term long associated with English recruiting, the headquarters of the gang were more familiarly, and for brevity's sake, called the "rondy." Publicans were partial to having the rondy on their premises because of the trade it brought them. Hence it was usually an alehouse, frequently one of the shadiest description, situated in the lowest slum of the town; but on occasions, as when the gang was of uncommon strength and the number of pressed men dealt with proportionately large, a private house or other suit-

¹ *Ad.* 7. 298—Law Officers' Opinions, 1733-56, No. 101.

able building was taken for the exclusive use of the service. It was distinguished by a flag—a Jack—displayed upon a pole. The cost of the two was 27s., and in theory they were supposed to last a year; but in towns where the populace evinced their love for the press by hewing down the pole and tearing the flag in ribbons, these emblems of national liberty had frequently to be renewed. At King's Lynn as much as £13 was spent upon them in four years—an outlay regarded by the Navy Board with absolute dismay. It would have been not less dismayed, perhaps, could it have seen the bunting displayed by rendezvous whose surroundings were friendly. There the same old Jack did duty year after year until, grimy and bedraggled, it more resembled the black flag than anything else that flew, wanting only the skull and cross-bones to make it a fitting emblem of authorised piracy.

The rondy was hardly a spot to which one would have resorted for a rest-cure. When not engaged in pressing, the gangsmen were a roistering, drinking crew, under lax control and never averse from a row, either amongst themselves or with outsiders. Sometimes the commanding officer made the place his residence, and when this was the case some sort of order prevailed. The floors were regularly swept, the beds made, the frowsy "general" gratified by a weekly "tip" on pay-day. But when, on the other hand, the gangsmen who did not "find themselves" occupied the rondy to the exclusion of the officer, eating and sleeping there, tramping in and out at all hours of the day and night, dragging pressed men in to be "regulated" and locked up, and diverting

such infrequent intervals of leisure as they enjoyed by pastimes in which fear of the "gent overhead" played no part—when this was the case the roudy became a veritable bear-garden, a place of unspeakable confusion wherein papers and pistols, boots and blankets, cutlasses, hats, beer-pots and staves cumbered the floors, the lockers and the beds with a medley of articles torn, rusty, mud-stained, dirt-begrimed and unkept.

Amongst accessories essential to the efficient activity of gangs stationed at coast or river towns the boat had first place. Sometimes both sail and row-boats were employed. Luggers of the old type, fast boats carrying a great press of sail, served best for overhauling ships; but on inland waterways, such as the Thames, the Humber or the Tyne, a "sort of wherry, constructed for rowing fast," was the favourite vehicle of pursuit. The rate of hire varied from 1s. a day to two or more guineas a week, according to the size and class of boat. At Cork it was "five shillings Irish" per day.

Accessories of a less indispensable nature, occasionally allowed, were, at Dartmouth and a few other places, cockades for the gangsmen's hats, supplied at a cost of 1s. each; at Tower Hill a messenger, pay 20s. a week; and at Appledore an umbrella for use in rainy weather, price 12s. 6d.

The arms of the gang comprised, first, a press-warrant, and, second, such weapons as were necessary to enforce it.

In the literature of the eighteenth century the warrant is inseparably associated with the short, incurvated service sword commonly known as the

cutlass or hanger; but in the press-gang prints of the period the gangsmen are generally armed with stout clubs answering to Smollett's "good oak plant." Apart from this artistic evidence, however, there is no valid reason for believing that the bludgeon ever came into general use as the ganger's weapon. As early as the reign of Anne he went armed with the "Queen's broad cutlash," and for most gangs, certainly for all called upon to operate in rough neighbourhoods, the hanger remained the stock weapon throughout the century. In expeditions involving special risk or danger, the musket and the pistol supplemented what must have been in itself no mean weapon.

As we have already seen, the earliest recorded press-warrants emanated from the king in person, whilst later ones were issued by the king in council and endorsed by the naval authorities. As the need of men became more and more imperative, however, this mode of issue was found to be too cumbersome and inexpeditious. Hence, by the time the eighteenth century came in, with its tremendously enhanced demands on behalf of the Navy, the royal prerogative in respect to warrants had been virtually delegated to the Admiralty, who issued them on their own initiative, though ostensibly in pursuance of His Majesty's Orders in Council.

An Admiralty warrant empowered the person to whom it was directed to "impress" as many "seamen" as possibly he could procure, giving to each man so impressed 1s. "for prest money." He was to impress none but such as "were strong bodies and capable to serve the king"; and, having so impressed such persons, he was to deliver them up to the officer

regulating the nearest rendezvous. All civil authorities were to be "aiding and assisting" to him in the discharge of this duty.

Now this document, the stereotyped press-warrant of the century, here concisely summarised in its own phraseology, was not at all what it purported to be. It was in fact a warrant out of time, an official anachronism, a red-tape survival of that bygone period when pressing still meant "presting" and force went no further than a threat. For men were now no longer "prested." They were pressed, and that, too, in the most drastic sense of the term. The king's shilling no longer changed hands. Even in Pepys' time men were pressed "without money," and in none of the accounts of expenses incurred in pressing during the century which followed, excepting only a very few of the earlier ones, can any such item as the king's shilling or prest-money be discovered. Its abolition was a logical sequence of the change from presting to pressing.

The seaman, moreover, so far from being the sole quarry of the warrant-holder, now sought concealment amongst a people almost without exception equally liable with himself to the capture he endeavoured to elude. Retained merely as a matter of form, and totally out of keeping with altered conditions, the warrant was in effect obsolete save as an instrument authorising one man to deprive another of his liberty in the king's name. Even the standard of "able bodies and capable" had deteriorated to such an extent that the officers of the fleet were kept nearly as busy weeding out and rejecting men as were the officers of the impress in taking them.

Still, the warrant served. Stripped of its obsolete injunctions, it read: "Go ye out into the highways and hedges, and water-ways, and compel them to come in"—enough, surely, for any officer imbued with zeal for His Majesty's service.

Though according to the strict letter of the law as defined by various decisions of the courts a press-warrant was legally executable only by the officer to whom it was addressed, in practice the limitation was very widely departed from, if not altogether ignored; for just as a constable or sheriff may call upon bystanders to assist him in the execution of his office, so the holder of a press-warrant, though legally unable to delegate his authority by other means, could call upon others to aid him in the execution of his duty. Naturally, the gangsmen being at hand, and being at hand for that very purpose, he gave them first preference. Hence, the gangsmen pressed on the strength of a warrant which in reality gave him no power to press.

While the law relating to the intensive force of warrants was thus deliberately set at naught, an extraordinary punctiliousness for legal formality was displayed in another direction. According to tradition and custom no warrant was valid until it had received the sanction of the civil power. Solicitor-General Yorke could find no statutory authority for such procedure.¹ He accordingly pronounced it to be non-essential to the validity of warrants. Nevertheless, save in cases where the civil power refused its endorsement, it was universally adhered to. What was bad law was notoriously good policy, for a

¹ *Ad.* 7. 298—Law Officers' Opinions, 1733-56, No. 102.

disaffected mayor, or an unfriendly Justice of the Peace, had it in his power to make the path of the impress officer a thorny one indeed. "Make unto yourselves friends," was therefore one of the first injunctions laid upon officers whose duties unavoidably made them many enemies.

CHAPTER IV

WHOM THE GANG MIGHT TAKE

IN theory an authority for the taking of seafaring men only, the press-warrant was in practice invested with all the force of a Writ of Quo Warranto requiring every able-bodied male adult to show by what right he remained at large. The difference between the theory and the practice of pressing was consequently as wide as the poles.

While the primary and ostensible objective of the impress remained always what it had been from the outset, the seaman who had few if any land-ties except those of blood or sex, from this root principle there sprang up a very Upas tree of pretension, whose noxious branches overspread practically every section of the community. Hence the press-gang, the embodiment of this pretension, eventually threw aside ostence and took its pick of all who came its way, let their occupation or position be what it might. It was no duty of the gangsmen to employ his hanger in splitting hairs. "First catch your man," was for him the greatest of all the commandments. Discrimination was for his masters. The weeding out could be done when the pressing was over.

The classes hardest hit by this lamentable want

of discrimination were the classes engaged in trade. "Mr. Coventry," wrote Pepys some four years after the Restoration, "showed how the medium of the men the King hath one year with another employed in his navy since his coming, hath not been above 3000 men, or at most 4000; and now having occasion for 30,000, the remaining 26,000 *must be found out of the Trade of the Nation.*" Naturally. Where a nation of shopkeepers was concerned it could hardly have been otherwise. They who go down to the sea in ships and do business in great waters, returning laden with the spoils of the commercial world, have perforce to render tribute unto Cæsar; but Mr. Commissioner Coventry little guessed, when he enunciated his corollary with such nice precision, to what it was destined to lead in the next hundred years or so.

Under the merciless exactions of the press-gang Trade did not, however, prove the submissive thing that was wont to stand at its doors and cry: "Will you buy? will you buy?" or to bow prospective customers into its rich emporiums with unctuous rubbing of hands and *sauve* words. Trade knew its power and determined to use it. "Look you! my Lords Commissioners," cried Trade, truculently cocking its hat in the face of Admiralty, "I have had enough. You have taken my butcher, my baker, my candlestick-maker, nor have you spared that worthy youth, the 'prentice who was to have wed my daughter. My coachman, the driver of my gilded chariot, goes in fear of you, and as for my sedan-chair man, he is no more found. My colliers, draymen, watermen, the carpenters who build my ships and

the mariners who sail them, the ablest of these my necessary helpers sling their hammocks in your fleet. You have crippled the printing of my Bible and the brewing of my Beer, and I can bear no more. Protect me from my arch-enemy the foreigner if you must and will, but not, my Lords Commissioners, by such monstrous personal methods as these." "Your servant!" said Admiralty, obsequious before the only power it feared—"your servant to command!" and straightway set about finding a remedy for the evils Trade complained of.

Now, to attain this end, so desirable if Trade were to be placated, it was necessary to define with precision either whom the gang might take, or whom it might not take; and here Admiralty, though notoriously a body without a brain, achieved a stroke of genius, for it brought down both birds with a single stone. Postulating first of all the old *lex sine lege* fiction that every native-born Briton and every British male subject born abroad was legally pressable, it laid it down as a logical sequence that no man, whatever his vocation or station in life, was lawfully exempt; that exemption was in consequence an official indulgence and not a right; and that apart from such indulgence every man, unless idiotic, blind, lame, maimed or otherwise physically unfit, was not only liable to be pressed, but could be legally pressed for the king's service at sea.¹ Having thus cleared the ground root and branch, Admiralty magnanimously proceeded to frame a category of persons whom, as an act of grace and a concession to Trade,

¹ *Ad.* 7. 300—Law Officers' Opinions, 1778-83, No. 26; and *Ad.* 1. 581—Admiral Berkeley, 14 Feb. 1805, well express the official view.

it was willing to protect from assault and capture by its emissary the press-gang.

These exemptions from the wholesale incidence of the impress were not granted all at once. Embodied from time to time in Acts of Parliament and so-called acts of official grace—slowly and painfully wrung from a reluctant Admiralty by the persistent demands and ever-growing power of Trade—they spread themselves over the entire century of struggle for the mastery of the sea, from which they were a reaction, and, touching the lives of the common people in a hundred and one intimate points and interests, culminated at length in the abolition of that most odious system of oppression from which they had sprung, and in a charter of liberties before which the famous charter of King John sinks into insignificance.

As a matter of policy the foreigner had first place in the list of exemptions. He could volunteer if he chose,¹ but he must not be pressed.² To deprive him of his right in this respect was to invite unpleasant diplomatic complications, of which England had already too many on her hands. Trade, too, looked upon the foreigner as her perquisite, and Trade must be indulged. Moreover, he fostered mutiny in the fleet, where he was prone to “fly in the face” of authority and to refuse to work, much less fight, for an

¹ Strenuous efforts were made in 1709 to induce the “Poor Palatines”—seven thousand of them encamped at Blackheath, and two thousand in Sir John Parson’s brewhouse at Camberwell—to enter for the navy. But the “thing was New to them to go aboard a Man of Warr,” so they declined the invitation, “having the Notion of being sent to Carolina.”—*Ad.* 1. 1437—Letters of Capt. Aston.

² 13 George II. cap. 17.



THE PRESS-GANG SEIZING A VICTIM.

alien people. If, however, he served on board British merchant ships for two years, or if he married in England, he at once lost caste, since he then became a naturalised British subject and was liable to have even his honeymoon curtailed by a visit from the press-gang. Such, in fact, was the fate of one William Castle of Bristol in 1806. Pressed there in that year on his return from the West Indies, he was discharged as a person of alien birth; but having immediately afterwards committed the indiscretion of taking a Bristol woman to wife, he was again pressed, this time within three weeks of his wedding-day, and kept by express order of Admiralty.¹

For some years after the passing of the Act exempting the foreigner, his rights appear to have been generally, though by no means universally respected. "Discharge him if not married or settled in England," was the usual order when he chanced to be taken by the gang. With the turn of the century, however, a reaction set in. Pressed men claiming to be of alien birth were thenceforth only liberated "if unfit for service."² For this untoward change the foreigner could blame none but himself. When taxed with having an English wife, he could seldom or never be induced to admit the soft impeachment. Consequently, whenever he was taken by the gang he was assumed, in the absence of proof to the contrary, to have committed the fatal act of naturalisation.³ Alien seamen in distress through

¹ *Ad. I.* 1537—Capt. Barker, 23 July 1806.

² *Ad. I.* 2733—Capt. Young, 11 March 1756, endorsement, and numerous instances.

³ *Ad. I.* 581—Admiral Phillip, 26 Feb. 1805.

shipwreck or other accidental causes, formed a humane exception to this unwritten law.

The negro was never reckoned an alien. Looked upon as a proprietary subject of the Crown, and having no one in particular to speak up for or defend him, he "shared the same fate as the free-born white man."¹ Many blacks, picked up in the West Indies or on the American coast "without hurting commerce," were to be found on board our ships of war, where, when not incapacitated by climatic conditions, they made active, alert seamen and "generally imagined themselves free."² Their point of view, poor fellows, was doubtless a strictly comparative one.

Theoretically exempt by virtue of his calling, whatever that might be, the landsman was in reality scarcely less marked down by the gang than his unfortunate brother the seafaring man; for notwithstanding all its professions to the contrary, Admiralty could not afford to ignore the potentialities of the reserve the landsman represented. Hence no occupation, no property qualification, could or did protect him. As early as 1705 old Justice, in his treatise on sea law, deplores bitterly the "barbarous custom of pressing promiscuously landsmen and seamen," and declares that the gang, in its purblind zeal, "hurried away tradesmen from their houses, 'prentices and journeymen from their masters' shops, and even housekeepers (householders) too." By 1744 the practice had become confirmed. In that year Capt. Innes, of His Majesty's armed sloop the *Hind*, applied to the Lords Commissioners for "Twenty

¹ *Ad.* 1. 482—Admiral Lord Colvill, 29 Oct. 1762.

² *Ad.* 1. 585—Admiral Donnelly, 22 Feb. 1815.

Landsmen from Twenty to Twenty-five years of Age." The Admiralty order, "Let the Regulating Captains send them as he desires,"¹ leaves no room for doubt as to the class of men provided. They were pressed men, not volunteers.

Nor is this a solitary instance of a practice that was rapidly growing to large proportions. Many a landsman, in the years that followed, shared the fate of the Irish "country farmer" who went into Waterford to sell his corn, and was there pressed and sent on board the tender; of James Whitefoot, the Bristol glover, "a timid, unformed young man, the comfort and support of his parents," who, although he had "never seen a ship in his life," was yet pressed whilst "passing to follow his business," which knew him no more; and of Winstanley, the London butcher, who served for upwards of sixteen years as a pressed man.² Wilkes' historic barber would have entered upon the same enforced career had not that astute Alderman discovered, to the astonishment of the nation at large, that a warrant which authorised the pressing of seamen did not necessarily authorise the pressing of a city tonsor.

Amongst landsmen the harvester, as a worker of vital utility to the country, enjoyed a degree of exemption accorded to few. Impress officers had particular instructions concerning him. They were to delete him from the category of those who might be taken. Armed with a certificate from the minister

¹ *Ad. I.* 1983—Capt. Innes, 3 May 1744, and endorsement.

² *Ad. I.* 1501—Capt. Bligh, 16 May 1781. *Ad. I.* 1531—Duchess of Gordon, 14 Feb. 1804. *Ad. I.* 584—Humble Petition of Betsey Winstanley, 2 Sept. 1814.

and churchwardens of his parish, this migratory farm-hand, provided always he were not a sailor masquerading in that disguise, could traverse the length and breadth of the land to all intents and purposes a free man. To him, as well as to the grower of corn who depended so largely upon his aid in getting his crop, the concession proved an inestimable boon. There were violations of the harvester's status, it is true;¹ but these were too infrequent to affect seriously the industry he represented.

So far as the press was concerned, the harvester was better off than the gentleman, for while the former could dress as he pleased, the latter was often obliged to dress as he could, and in this lay an element of danger. So long as his clothes were as good as the blood he boasted, and he wore them with an aplomb suggestive of position and influence, the gentleman was safe; but let his pretensions to gentility lie more in the past than in the suit on his back, and woe betide him! In spite of his protestations the gang took him, and he was lucky indeed if, like the gentleman who narrates his experience in the *Review* for the 10th of February 1706, he was able to convince his captors that he was foreign born by "talking Latin and Greek."

To the people at large, whether landmen or seafarers, the Act exempting from the press every male under eighteen and over fifty-five years of age would have brought a sorely needed relief had not Admiralty been a past-master in the subtle art of outwitting the law. In this instance a simple regulation did the trick. Every man or boy who claimed the benefit of

¹ *Ad.* I. 5125—Memorial of Sir William Oglander, Bart., July 1796.

the age-limit when pressed, was required to prove his claim ere he could obtain his discharge.¹ The impossibility of any general compliance with such a demand on the part of persons often as ignorant of birth certificates as they were of the sea, practically wiped the exemption off the slate.

In the eyes of the Regulating Captain no man was older than he looked, no lad as young as he avowed. Hence thousands of pressed men over fifty-five, who did not look the age they could not prove, figured on the books of the fleet with boys whose precocity of appearance gave the lie to their assertions. George Stephens, son of a clerk in the Transport Office, suffered impressment when barely thirteen; and the son of a corporal in Lord Elkinton's regiment, one Alexander M'Donald, was 'listed in the same manner while still "under the age of twelve."² The gang did not pause by the way to discuss such questions.

Apprentices fell into a double category—those bound to the sea, those apprenticed on land. Nominally, the sea apprentice was protected from the impress for a term of three years from the date of his indentures, provided he had not used the sea before;³ while the land apprentice enjoyed immunity under the minimum age-limit of eighteen years. The proviso in the first case, however, left open a loophole the impress officer was never slow to take advantage of; and the minimum age-limit, as we

¹ *Ad.* 7. 300—Law Officers' Opinions, 1778-83, No. 43: "It is incumbent on those who claim to be exempted to prove the facts."

² *Ad.* 1. 583—Vice-Admiral Hunter, 10 May 1813. *Ad.* 1. 1503—Capt. Butchart, 22 Jan. 1782, and enclosure.

³ 2 & 3 Anne, cap. 6, re-affirmed 13 George II. cap. 17.

have just seen, had little if any existence in fact. Apprentices pressed after the three years' exemption had expired were never given up, nor could their masters successfully claim them in law. They dropped like ripe fruit into the lap of Admiralty. On the other hand, apprentices pressed within the three years' exemption period were generally discharged, for if they were not, they could be freed by a writ of Habeas Corpus, or else the masters could maintain an action for damages against the Admiralty.¹ 'Prentices who "eloped" or ran away from their masters, and then entered voluntarily, could not be reclaimed by any known process at law if they were over eighteen years of age. On the whole, the position of the apprentice, whether by land or sea, was highly anomalous and uncertain. Often taken by the gang in the hurry of visiting a ship, or in the scurry of a hot press on shore, he was in effect the shuttlecock of the service, to-day singing merrily at his capstan or bench, to-morrow bewailing his hard fate on board a man-o'-war.

When it came to the exemption of seamen, Admiralty found itself on the horns of a dilemma. Both the Navy and the merchant service depended in a very large degree upon the seaman who knew the ropes—who could take his turn at the wheel, scud aloft without going through the lubber-hole, and act promptly and sailorly in emergency. To take wholesale such men as these, while it would enormously enhance the effectiveness of His Majesty's ships of war, must inevitably cripple sea-borne trade. It was therefore necessary, for the well-being of both services, to discover the golden mean.

¹ *Ad. 7.* 300—Law Officers' Opinions, 1778-83, No. 25.

According to statute law¹ every person using the sea, of what age soever he might be, was exempt from the impress for two years from the time of his first making the venture. The concession did not greatly improve the situation from a trade point of view. It merely touched the fringe of the problem, and Trade was insistent.

A further concession was accordingly made. All masters, mates, boatswains and carpenters of vessels of fifty tons and upwards were exempted from the impress on condition of their going before a Justice of the Peace and making oath to their several qualifications. This affidavit, coupled with a succinct description of the deponent, constituted the holder's "protection" and shielded him, or was supposed to shield him, from molestation by the gang. Masters and mates of colliers, and of vessels laid up for the winter, came under this head; but masters or mates of vessels detected in running dutiable goods, or caught harbouring deserters from the fleet, could be summarily dealt with notwithstanding their protections. The same fate befell the mate or apprentice who was lent by one ship to another.

In addition to the executive of the vessel, as defined in the foregoing paragraph, it was of course necessary to extend protection to as many of her "hands" as were essential to her safe and efficient working. How many were really required for this purpose was, however, a moot point on which ship-masters and naval officers rarely saw eye to eye; and since the arbiter in all such disputes was the "quarter-deck gentlemen," the decision seldom if ever went in favour of the master.

¹ 13 George II. cap. 17.

The importance of the coal trade won for colliers an early concession, which left no room for differences of opinion. Every vessel employed in that trade was entitled to carry one exempt able-bodied man for each hundred units of her registered tonnage, provided it did not exceed three hundred. The penalty for pressing such men was £10 for each man taken.¹

On the coasts of Scotland commanders of war-ships whose carpenters had run or broken their leave, and who perhaps were left, like Capt. Gage of the *Otter* sloop, "without so much as a Gimblett on board,"² might press shipwrights from the yards on shore to fill the vacancy, and suffer no untoward consequences; but south of the Tweed this mode of collecting "chips" was viewed with disfavour. There, although ship-carpenters, sailmakers and men employed in rope-walks were by a stretch of the official imagination reckoned as persons using the sea, and although they were generally acknowledged to be no less indispensable to the complete economy of a ship than the able-bodied seaman, legal questions of an extremely embarrassing nature nevertheless cropped up when the scene of their activities underwent too sudden and violent a change. The pressing of such artificers consequently met with little official encouragement.³

Where the Admiralty scored, in the matter of ship protections, and scored heavily, was when the protected person went ashore. For when on shore the protected master, mate, boatswain, carpenter,

¹ 2 & 3 Anne, cap. 6.

² *Ad.* 1. 1829—Capt. Gage, 29 Sept. 1742.

³ *Ad.* 7. 300—Law Officers' Opinions, 1778-83, No. 2.

apprentice or seaman no longer enjoyed protection unless he was there "on ship's duty." The rule was most rigorously, not to say arbitrarily, enforced. Thus at Plymouth, in the year 1746, a seaman who protested in broken English that he had come ashore to "look after his master's *sheep*," was pressed because the naval officer who met and questioned him "imagined sheep to have no affinity with a ship!"¹

Any mate who failed to register his name at the rendezvous, as soon as his ship arrived in port, did so at his peril. Without that formality he was "not entitled to liberty." So strict was the rule that when William Tassell, mate of the *Elizabeth* ketch, was caught drinking in a Lynn alehouse one night at ten o'clock, after having obtained "leave to run about the town" until eight only, he was immediately pressed and kept, the Admiralty refusing to declare the act irregular.²

In many ports it was customary for sailors to sleep ashore while their ships lay at the quay or at moorings. The proceeding was highly dangerous. No sailor ever courted sleep in such circumstances, even though armed with a "line from the master setting

¹ *Ad. I.* 2381—Capt. John Roberts, 11 July 1746. Capt. Roberts was a very downright individual, and years before the characteristic had got him into hot water. The occasion was when, in 1712, an Admiralty letter, addressed to him at Harwich and containing important instructions, by some mischance went astray and Roberts accused the Clerk of the Check of having appropriated it. The latter called him a liar, whereupon Roberts "gave him a slap in the face and bid him learn more manners." For this exhibition of temper he was superseded and kept on the half-pay list for some six years. *Ad. I.* 1471—Capt. Brand, 8 March 1711-12. *Ad. I.* 2378, section 11, Admiralty note.

² *Ad. I.* 1546—Capt. Bowyer, 25 July 1809, and enclosure.

forth his business," without grave risk of waking to find himself in the bilboes. The Mayor of Poole once refused to "back" press-warrants for local use unless protected men belonging to trading vessels of the port were granted the privilege of lodging ashore. "Certainly not!" retorted the Admiralty. "We cannot grant Poole an indulgence *that other towns do not enjoy.*"¹

In spite of the risk involved, the sailor slept ashore and—if he survived the night—tried to steal back to his ship in the grey of the morning. Now and then, by a run of luck, he made his offing in safety; but more frequently he met the fate of John White of Bristol, who was taken by the gang when only "about ninety yards from his vessel."

The only exceptions to this stringent rule were certain classes of men engaged in the Greenland and South Seas whale fisheries. Skilled harpooners, linesmen and boat-steerers, on their return from a whaling cruise, could obtain from any Collector of Customs, for sufficient bond put in, a protection from the impress which no Admiralty regulation, however sweeping, could invalidate or override. Safeguarded by this document, they were at liberty to live and work ashore, or to sail in the coal trade, until such time as they should be required to proceed on another whaling voyage. If, however, they took service on board any vessel other than a collier, they forfeited their protections and could be "legally detained."²

In one ironic respect the gang strongly resembled

¹ *Ad.* 1. 2485—Capt. Scott, 4 Jan. 1780, and endorsement.

² 13 George II. cap. 28. *Ad.* 1. 2732—Capt. Young, 14 March 1756. *Ad.* 7 300—Law Officers' Opinions, 1778–83, No. 42.

a boomerang. So thoroughly and impartially did it do its work that it recoiled upon those who used it. The evil was one of long standing. Pepys complained of it bitterly in his day, asserting that owing to its prevalence letters could neither be received nor sent, and that the departmental machinery for victualling and arming the fleet was like to be undone. With the growth of pressing the imposition was carried to absurd lengths. The crews of the impress tenders, engaged in conveying pressed men to the fleet, could not "proceed down" without falling victims to the very service they were employed in.¹ To check this egregious robbing of Peter to pay Paul, both the Navy Board and the Government were obliged to "protect" their own sea-going hirelings, and even then the protections were not always effective.

Between the extremes represented by the landsman who enjoyed nominal exemption and the seaman who enjoyed none, there existed a middle or amphibious class of persons who lived exclusively on neither land nor water, but habitually used both in the pursuit of their various callings. These were the wherry or watermen, the lightermen, bargemen, keelmen, trowmen and canal-boat dwellers frequenting mainly the inland waterways of the country.

In the reign of Richard II. the jurisdiction of Admirals was defined as extending, in a certain particular, to the "main stream of great rivers nigh the sea."² Had the same line of demarcation been observed in the pressing of those whose occupations lay upon rivers, there would have been little cause for

¹ *Ad. I.* 1486—Capt. Baird, 27 Feb. 1755, and numerous instances.

² 15 Richard II. cap. 2.

outcry or complaint. But the Admiralty, the successors of the ancient "Guardians of the Sea" whose powers were so clearly limited by the Ricardian statute, gradually extended the old-time jurisdiction until, for the purposes of the impress, it included all waterways, whether "nigh the sea" or inland, natural or artificial, whereon it was possible for craft to navigate. All persons working upon or habitually using such waterways were regarded as "using the sea," and later warrants expressly authorised the gangs to take as many of them as they should be able, not excepting even the ferryman. The extension was one of tremendous consequence, since it swept into the Navy thousands of men who, like the Ely and Cambridge bargemen, were "hardy, strong fellows, who never failed to make good seamen."¹

Amongst these denizens of the country's waterways the position of the Thames wherryman was peculiar in that from very early times he had been exempt from the ordinary incidence of the press on condition of his periodically supplying from his own numbers a certain quota of able-bodied men for the use of the fleet. The rule applied to all watermen using the river between Gravesend and Windsor, and members of the fraternity who "withdrew and hid themselves" at the time of the making of such levies, were liable to be imprisoned for two years and "banished any more to row for a year and a day."² The exemption he otherwise enjoyed appears to have conduced not a little to the waterman's proverbial joviality. As a youth he spent his leisure in "dancing

¹ *Ad.* 1. 1486—Capt. Baird, 29 April 1755.

² 2 & 3 Philip and Mary, cap. 16.

and carolling," thus earning the familiar sobriquet of "the jolly young waterman." Even so, his tenure of happiness was anything but secure. With the naval officer and the gang he was no favourite, and few opportunities of dashing his happiness were allowed to pass unimproved. In the person of John Golden, however, they caught a Tartar. To the dismay of the Admiralty and the officer responsible for pressing him, he proved to be one of my Lord Mayor's bargemen.¹

Apart from the watermen of the Thames, the purchase of immunity from the press by periodic levies met with little favour, and though the levy was in many cases reluctantly adopted, it was only because it entailed the lesser of two evils. The basis of such levies varied from one man in ten to one in five—a percentage which the Admiralty considered a "matter of no distress"; and the penalty for refusing to entertain them was wholesale pressing.

The Tyne keelmen, while ostensibly consenting to buy immunity on this basis, seldom levied the quota upon themselves. By offering bounties they drew the price of their freedom to work in the keels from outside sources. Lord Thurlow confessed that he did not know what "working in the keels" meant.² There were few in the fleet who could have enlightened him of their own experience. The keelmen kept their ranks as far as possible intact. In this they were materially aided by the Mayor and Corporation of Newcastle, who held a "Grand Protection" of the Admiralty, and in return for this

¹ *Ad.* 1. 2733—Capt. Young, 7 March 1756.

² *Ad.* 7. 299—Law Officers' Opinions, 1752-77, No. 70.

exceptional mark of their Lordships' favour did all they could to further the pressing of persons less essential to the trade of the town and river than were their own keelmen.

On the rivers Severn and Wye there was plying in 1806 a flotilla of ninety-eight trows, ranging in capacity from sixty to one hundred and thirty tons, and employing five hundred and eighty-eight men, of whom practically all enjoyed exemption from the press. It being a time of exceptional stress for men, the Admiralty considered this proportion excessive, and Capt. Barker, at that time regulating the press at Bristol, was ordered to negotiate terms. He proposed a contribution of trowmen on the basis of one in every ten, coupling the suggestion with a thinly veiled threat that if it were not complied with he would set his gangs to work and take all he could get. The Association of Severn Traders, finding themselves thus placed between the devil and the deep sea, agreed to the proposal with a reluctance they in vain endeavoured to hide under ardent protestations of loyalty.¹

In the three hundred "flats" engaged in carrying salt, coals and other commodities between Nantwich and Liverpool there were employed, in 1795, some nine hundred men who had up to that time largely escaped the attentions of the gang. In that year, however, an arrangement was entered into, under duress of the usual threat, to the effect that they should contribute one man in six, or at the least one man in nine, in return for exemption to be granted to the remainder.²

¹ *Ad.* 1. 1537—Capt. Barker, 24 April and 9 May 1806, and enclosure.

² *Ad.* 1. 578—Admiral Pringle, Report on Rendezvous, 2 April 1795.

Turf-boats plying on the Blackwater and the Shannon seem to have enjoyed no special concessions. The men working them were pressed whenever they could be laid hold of, and if they were not always kept, their discharge was due to reasons of physical unfitness rather than to any acknowledged right to labour unmolested. Ireland's contribution to the fleet, apart from the notoriously disaffected, was of too much consequence to be played with ; for the Irishman was essentially a good-natured soul, and when his native indolence and slowness of movement had been duly corrected by a judicious use of the rattan and the rope's-end, his services were highly esteemed in His Majesty's ships of war.

In the category of exemptions the fisheries occupied a place entirely their own. They were carefully fostered, but indifferently protected.

Previous to the year 1729 the most important concession granted to those engaged in the taking of fish was the establishing of two extra "Fishe Dayes" in the week. The provision was embodied in a statute of 1563, whereby the people were required, under a penalty of £3 for each omission, "or els three monethes close Imprisonment without Baile or Maineprise," to eat fish, to the total exclusion of meat, on Fridays and Saturdays, and to content themselves with "one dish of flesh to three dishes of fish" on Wednesdays.¹ The enactment had no religious significance whatever ; but in order to avoid any suspicion of Popish tendencies it was deemed advisable, by those responsible for the measure, to saddle it with a rider to the effect that all persons

¹ 5 Elizabeth, cap. 5.

teaching, preaching or proclaiming the eating of fish, as enjoined by the Act, to be of "necessitee for the saving of the soule of man," should be punished as "spreaders of fause newes." The true significance of the measure lay in this. The abolition of Romish fast-days had resulted, since the Reformation, in an enormous falling off in the consumption of fish, and this decrease had in turn played havoc with the fisheries. Now the fisheries were in reality the national incubator for seamen, and Cecil, Elizabeth's astute Secretary of State, perceiving in their decadence a grave menace to the manning of prospective fleets, determined, for that reason if for no other, to reanimate the dying industry. The Act in question was the practical outcome of his deliberations.¹

An enactment which combined so happily the interests of the fisher classes with those of national defence could not but be productive of far-reaching consequences. The fishing industry not only thrived exceedingly because of it, it in time became, as Cecil clearly foresaw it would become, a nursery for seamen and a feeder of the fleet as unrivalled for the excellence of its material as it was inexhaustible in its resources. Its prosperity was in fact its curse. Few exemptions were granted it. Adventurers after whale and cod had special concessions, suited to the peculiar conditions of their calling; but with these exceptions craft of every description employed in the taking or the carrying of fish, for a very protracted period enjoyed only such exemptions as were grudgingly extended to sea-going craft in general. The

¹ *State Papers Domestic*, Elizabeth, vol. xxvii. Nos. 71 and 72, comprising Cecil's original memoranda.

source of supply represented by the leviathan industry was too valuable to be lightly restricted.

On the other hand, it was too important to be lightly depleted. Therefore under Cecil's Act establishing extra "Fishe Dayes," no fisherman "using or haunting the sea" could be pressed off-hand to serve in the Queen's Navy. The "taker," as the press-master was at that time called, was obliged to carry his warrant to the Justices inhabiting the place or places where it was proposed that the fishermen should be pressed, and of these Justices any two were empowered to "choose out such number of hable men" as the warrant specified. In this way originated the "backing" or endorsing of warrants by the civil power. At first obligatory only as regards the pressing of fishermen, it came to be regarded in time as an essential preliminary to all pressing done on land.

No further provision of a special nature would appear to have been made for the protecting of fisher folk from the press until the year 1729, when an exemption was granted which covered the master, one apprentice, one seaman and one landsman for each vessel.¹ In 1801, however, a sweeping change was inaugurated. A statute of that date provided that no person engaged in the taking, curing or selling of fish should be impressed.² The exemption came too late to prove substantially beneficial to an industry which had suffered incalculable injury from the then recent wars. The press-gang was already nearing its last days.

Prior to the Act of 1801 persons whose sole

¹ 2 George II. cap. 15.

² 41 George III. cap. 21.

occupation was "to pick oysters and mussels at low water" were accounted fishermen and habitually pressed as "using the sea."

The position of the smaller fry of fishermen is thrown into vivid relief by an official *communiqué* of 1709 as opposed to an incident of later date. "These poor people," runs the note, which was addressed to a naval commander who had pressed a fisherman out of a boat of less than three tons, "have been always protected for the support of their indigent families, and therefore they must not be taken into the service unless there is a pressing occasion, *and then they will be all forced thereinto.*"¹ Captain Boscawen, writing from the Nore in 1745, supplies the antithesis. He had been instructed to procure half a dozen fishing smacks, each of not less than sixty tons burden, for transport purposes. None were to be had. "The reason the fishermen give for not employing vessels of that size," he states, in explanation of the fact, "is that *all the young men are pressed*, and that the old men and boys are not able to work them."²

Conditions such as these in time taught the fisherman wisdom, and he awoke to the fact that exemption for a consideration, as in the case of workers on rivers and canals, was preferable to paying through the nose. The Admiralty was never averse from driving a bargain of this description. It saved much distress, much bad blood, much good money. In this way Worthing fishermen bought exemption in 1780. The fishery of that town was then in its infancy, the people engaged in it "very poor and needy." They em-

¹ *Ad.* 1. 2377—Capt. Robinson, 4 Feb. 1708-9, and endorsement.

² *Ad.* 1. 1481—Capt. Boscawen, 23 Dec. 1745.

ployed only sixteen boats. Yet they found it cheaper to contribute five men to the Navy, at a cost of £40 in bounties, than to entertain the gang.¹

The Orkney fisherman bought his freedom, both on his fishing-grounds and when carrying his catch to market, on similar terms; but being a person of frugal turn of mind, he gradually developed the habit of withholding his stipulated quota. The unexpected arrival in his midst of an armed smack, followed by a spell of vigorous pressing, taught him that to be penny-wise is sometimes to be pound-foolish.²

On the Scottish coasts fishermen and ferrymen—the latter a numerous class on that deeply indented seaboard—offered up one man in every five or six on the altar of protection. The sacrifice distressed them less than indiscriminate pressing. A prosperous people, they chose out those of their number who could best be spared, supporting the families thus left destitute by common subscription. Buss fishermen, who followed the migratory herring from fishing-ground to fishing-ground, were in another category. Their contribution, when on the Scottish coast, figured out at a man per buss; but as they were for some inscrutable reason called upon to pay similar tribute on other parts of the coast, they cannot be said to have escaped any too lightly. Neither did the four hundred fishing-boats composing the Isle of Man fleet. Their crews were obliged to surrender one man in every seven.³

¹ *Ad.* I. 1446—Capt. Alms, 2 Jan. 1780.

² *Ad.* I. 2740—Lieut. Abbs, 11 May 1798, and Admiralty note.

³ *Ad.* I. 579—Admiral Pringle, Report on Rendezvous, 2 April 1795; Admiral Philip, Report on Rendezvous, 1 Aug. 1801.

Opinions as to the value of material drawn from these sources differed widely. The buss fisherman was on all hands acknowledged to be a seasoned sailor ; but when it came to those employed in smaller craft, it was held that heaving at the capstan for a matter of only six or seven weeks in the year could never convert raw lads into useful seamen, even though they continued that healthful form of exercise all their lives. This was the view entertained by the masters of fishing-smacks smarting from loss of "hands."¹

Admiralty saw things in quite another light. "What you admit," said their Lordships, expressing the counter-view, "it is our business to prevent. We will therefore take these lads, who are admittedly of no service to you save for hauling in your nets or getting your anchors, and will make of them what you, on your own showing, can never make—able seamen." The argument, backed as it was by the strong arm of the press-gang, was unanswerable.

The fact that the fisherman passed much of his time on shore did not free him from the press any more than it freed the waterman, or the worker in keel or trow. In his main vocation he "used the sea," and that was enough. For the use of the sea was the rule and standard by which every man's liability to the press was supposed to be measured and determined.

Except in the case of masters, mates and apprentices to the sea, whose affidavits or indentures constituted their respective safeguards against the press, every person exempt from that infliction,

¹ *Ad. I.* 1497—Thomas Hurry, master, 3 March 1777.

whether by statute law or Admiralty indulgence, was required to have in his possession an official voucher setting forth the fact and ground of his exemption. This document was ironically termed his "protection."

Admiralty protections were issued under the hand of the Lord High Admiral; ordinary protections, by departments and persons who possessed either delegated or vested powers of issue. Thus each Trinity House protected its own pilots; the Customs protected whale fishermen and apprentices to the sea; impress officers protected seamen temporarily lent to ships in lieu of men taken out of them by the gangs. Some protections were issued for a limited period and lapsed when that period expired; others were of perpetual "force," unless invalidated by some irregular act on the part of the holder. No protection was good unless it bore a minute description of the person to whom it applied, and all protections had to be carried on the person and produced upon demand. Thomas Moverly was pressed out of a wherry in the Thames owing to his having changed his clothes and left his protection at home; and John Scott of Mistley, in Suffolk, was taken whilst working in his shirtsleeves, though his protection lay in the pocket of his jacket, only a few yards away.¹

The most trifling irregularity in the protection itself, or the slightest discrepancy between the personal appearance of the bearer and the written description of him, was enough to convert the protection into so much waste paper and the bearer into a naval seaman.

¹ *Ad. I.* 1479—Capt. Bridges, 11 August 1743. *Ad. I.* 1531—Capt. Ballard, 15 March 1804, and enclosure.

North-country apprentices, whose indentures bore a 14s. stamp in accordance with Scottish law, were pressed because that document did not bear a 15s. stamp according to English law. A seaman was in one instance described in his protection as "smooth-faced," that is, beardless. The impress officer scrutinised him closely. "Aha!" said he, "you are not smooth-faced. You are pock-marked"; and he pressed the poor fellow for that reason.

To be over-protected was as bad as having no protection at all. Thomas Letting, a collier's man, and John Anthony of the merchant ship *Providence*, learnt this fact to their cost when they were taken out of their respective ships for having each two protections. In short, the slightest pretext served. If a protection had but a few more days to run; if the name, date, place or other essential particular showed signs of "coaxing," that is, of having been "on purpose rubbed out" or altered; if a man's description did not figure in his protection, or if it figured on the back instead of in the margin, or in the margin instead of on the back; if his face wore a ruddy rather than a pale look, if his hair were red when it ought to have been brown, if he proved to be "tall and remarkable thin" when he should have been middle-sized and thick-set—in any of these, as in a hundred and one similar cases, the bearer of the protection paid the penalty for what the impress officer regarded as a "hoodwinking attempt" to cheat the King's service of an eligible man.

Notwithstanding the fact that the impress officer regarded every pressable man as a person who made

it his chief business in life to defraud the Navy of his services on the "miserable plea of a protection," it by no means followed that his zeal in pressing him on that account had in every case the countenance or met with the unqualified approval of the Admiralty. Thousands of men and boys taken in this irresponsible fashion obtained their discharge, though with more or less difficulty and delay, when the facts of the case were laid before the naval authorities; and in general it may be said, that although the Lords Commissioners were only too ready to wink at any colourable excuse whereby another physical unit might be added to the fleet, they nevertheless laid it down as a rule, inviolable at least on paper, "never to press any man from protections," since it brought "great trouble and clamour upon them."¹ To assert that the rule was generally obeyed would be to turn the truth into a lie. On the contrary, it was almost universally disregarded. Both officers and gangs traversed it on every possible occasion, leaving the justice or injustice of the act to the arbitrament of the higher tribunal. Zeal for the service was no crime, and to release a man was always so much easier than to catch him.

"Pressing from protections," as the phrase ran in the service, did not therefore mean that the Admiralty over-rode its own protections at pleasure. It merely signified that on occasion more than ordinarily stringent measures were adopted for the holding-up and examining of all protected persons, or of as many of them as could be got at by the gangs, to the end that all false or fraudulent vouchers might be weeded out and the dishonest bearers of them consigned to

¹ *Ad.* 3. 50—Admiralty Minutes, 26 Feb. 1744-5.

another place. And yet there were times when "pressing from protections" had its plenary significance too.

Lovers of prints who are familiar with Hogarth's "Stage Coach ; or, a Country Inn Yard," date 1747, will readily recall the two "outsides"—the one a down-in-the-mouth soldier, the other a jolly Jack-tar on whose bundle may be read the word "Centurion." Now the *Centurion* was Anson's flag-ship, and in this print Hogarth has incidentally recorded the fact that her crew, on their return from that famous voyage round the world, were awarded life-protections from the press.¹

The life-protection was an indulgence extended to few. Samuel Davidson of Newcastle, sailor, aged fifty, who had "served for nine years during the late wars," in 1777 made bold to plead that fact as a reason why he should be freed from the attentions of the press-gang for the rest of his life. But the Lords Commissioners refused to admit the plea "unless he was in a position not inferior to that of chief mate." On the other hand, Henry Love of Hastings, who had merely served in a single Dutch expedition, but had the promise of Pitt and Dundas that both he and those who volunteered with him should never be pressed, was immediately discharged when that calamity befell him.²

The granting of extraordinary protections was thus something entirely erratic and not to be counted upon. Captain Balchen in 1708 had special protections for ten of his ship's company whom he

¹ *Ad. I.* 1440—Capt. Anson, 24 July 1744.

² *Ad. I.* 1449—Capt. Columbine, 21 July 1800.

desired to bring to London as witnesses in a suit then pending against him ; but the building of the three earlier Eddystone lighthouses was allowed to be seriously impeded by the pressing of the unprotected workmen when on shore at Plymouth, and the keepers of the first erection of that name were once carried off bag and baggage by the gang.

Smeaton, who built the third Eddystone, protected his men by means of silver badges, and his store-boat enjoyed similar immunity—presumably with the consent of Admiralty—by reason of a picture of the lighthouse painted on her sail. Other great constructors, as well as rich mercantile firms, bought protection at a price. They supplied a stipulated number of men for the fleet, and found the arrangement a highly convenient one for ridding themselves of those who were useless to them or had incurred their displeasure.¹

Private protections, of which great numbers saw the light, were in no case worth the paper they were written on. Joseph Bettsworth of Ryde, Isle of Wight, Attorney-at-Law and Lord of the Manor of Ashey and Ryde, by virtue of an ancient privilege pertaining to that Manor and confirmed by royal Letters Patent, in 1790 protected some twenty seafaring men to work his “Antient Ferry or Passage for the Wafting of Passengers to and from Ride, Portsmouth and Gosport, in a smack of about 14 tons, and a wherry.” The regulating captain at the last-named place asked what he should do about it. “Press every man as soon as possible,” replied their Lordships.²

¹ *Ad.* i. 583—Admiral Thornborough, 30 Nov. 1813.

² *Ad.* i. 1506—Capt. John Bligh, June 1790, and enclosure.

CHAPTER V

WHAT THE GANG DID AFLOAT

"A MAN we want, and a man we must have," was the naval cry of the century.¹

Nowhere was the cry so loud or so insistent as on the sea, where every ship of war added to its volume. In times of peace, when the demand for men was gauged by those every-day factors, sickness, death and desertion, it dwindled, if it did not altogether die away; but given a war-cloud on the near horizon and the cry for men swelled, as many-voiced as there were keels in the fleet, to a sudden clamour of formidable proportions—a clamour that only the most strenuous and unremitting exertions could in any measure appease.

Every navy is argus-eyed, and in crises such as these, when the very existence of the nation was perhaps at stake, it was first and principally towards the crews of the country's merchant ships that the eyes of the Navy were directed; for, shipboard life and shipboard duty being largely identical in both services, no elaborate training was required to convert the merchant sailor into a first-rate man-o'-war's-man. The ships of both services were sailing ships. Both, as a rule, went armed. Hence, not only was

¹ *Ad.* 1. 1531—Deposition of John Swinburn, 28 July 1804.

the merchant sailor an able seaman, he was also trained in the handling of great guns, and in the use of the cutlass, the musket and the boarding-pike. In a word, he was that most valuable of all assets to a people seeking to dominate the sea—a man-o'-war's-man ready-made, needing only to be called in in order to become immediately effective.

The problem was how to catch him—how to take him fresh and vigorous from his deep-sea voyaging—how to enroll him in the King's Navy ere he got ashore with a pocketful of money and relaxed his hardened muscles in the uncontrolled debauchery he was so partial to after long abstention.

A device of the simplest yet of the most elaborate description met the difficulty. It was based upon the fact that to take the sailor afloat was a much easier piece of strategy than to ferret him out of his hiding-places after he got ashore. The impress trap was therefore set in such a way as to catch him before he reached the land.

With infinite ingenuity and foresight sea-gangs were picketed from harbour to harbour, from headland to headland, until they formed an almost unbroken chain around the coasts and guarded the sailor's every point of accustomed approach from overseas. This was the outer cordon of the system, the beginning of the gauntlet the returning sailor had to run, and he was a smart seaman indeed who could successfully negotiate the uncharted rocks and shoals with which the coast was everywhere strewn in his despite.

The composition of this chain of sea-gangs was mixed to a degree, yet singularly homogeneous.

First of all, on its extreme outer confines, perhaps as far down Channel as the Scillies, or as far north as the thirteen-mile stretch of sea running between the Mull of Kintyre and the Irish coast, where the trade for Liverpool, Whitehaven, Dublin and the Clyde commonly came in, the homing sailor would suddenly descry, bearing down upon him under press of sail, the trim figure of one of His Majesty's frigates, or the clean, swift lines of an armed sloop. The meeting was no chance one. Both the frigate and the sloop were there by design, the former cruising to complete her own complement, the latter to complete that of some ship-of-the-line at Plymouth, Spithead or the Nore, to which she stood in the relation of tender.

Tenders were vessels taken into the king's service "at the time of Impressing Seamen." Hired at certain rates per month, they continued in the service as long as they were required, often most unwillingly, and were principally employed in obtaining men for the king's ships or in matters relative thereto. In burden they varied from thirty or forty to one hundred tons,¹ the smaller craft hugging the coast and dropping in from port to port, the larger cruising far beyond shore limits. For deep-sea or trade-route cruising the smaller craft were of little use. No ship of force would bring-to for them.

While press-warrants were supplied regularly to every warship, no matter what her rating, the supply of tenders was less general and much more erratic. It was only when occasion demanded it, and then

¹ This was the maximum tonnage for which the Navy Board paid, but when trade was slack larger vessels could be had, and were as a matter of fact frequently employed, at the nominal tonnage rate.

only to ships of the first, second and third rate, that tenders were assigned for the purpose of bringing their crews up to full strength. The urgency of the occasion, the men to be "rose," the diplomacy of the commander determined the number. A tender to each ship was the rule, but however parsimonious the Navy Board might be on such occasions, a carefully worded appeal to its prejudices seldom failed to produce a second, or even a third attendant vessel. Boscawen once had recourse to this ingenious ruse in order to obtain tender number two. The Navy Board detested straggling seamen, so he suggested that, with several tenders lying idle in the Thames, his men might be far more profitably employed than in straggling about town. "Most reprehensible practice!" assented the Board, and placed a second vessel at his disposal without more ado. Lieut. Upton was immediately put in charge of her and ordered seawards. He returned within a week with twenty-seven men, pressed out of merchantmen in Margate Roads.¹

The tender assigned to Boscawen on this occasion was the *Galloper*, an American-built vessel, "rigged in the manner the West Indians do their sloops." Her armament consisted of six 9-pounders and threescore small-arms, but as a sea-boat she belied her name, for she was hopelessly sluggish under sail, and the great depth of her waist, and her consequent liability to ship seas in rough weather, rendered her "very improper" for cruising in the Channel.

For her company she had a master, a mate and six hands supplied by the owners, in addition to

¹ *Ad.* 1. 1478—Letters of Capt. Boscawen, July and August 1743.

thirty-four seamen temporarily drafted into her from Boscawen's ship, the *Dreadnought*. It was the duty of the former to work the vessel, of the latter to do the pressing; but these duties were largely interchangeable. All were under the command of the lieutenant, who with forty-two men at his beck and call could organise, on a pinch, five gangs of formidable strength and yet leave sufficient hands, given fair weather, to mind the tender in their temporary absence. Tender's men were generally the flower of a ship's company, old hands of tried fidelity, equal to any emergency and reputedly proof against bribery, rum and petticoats. Yet the temptation to give duty the slip and enjoy the pleasures of town for a season sometimes proved too strong, even for them, and we read of one boat's-crew of eight, who, overcome in this way, were discovered after many days in a French prison. Instead of going pressing in the Downs, they had gone to Boulogne.

On the commanders of His Majesty's ships the onus of raising men fell with intolerable insistence. Nelson's greatest pleasure in his promotion to Admiral's rank is said to have been derived from the fact that with it there came a blessed cessation to the scurvy business of pressing; and there were in the service few captains, whether before or after Nelson's day, who could not echo with hearty approval the sentiment of Capt. Brett of the *Roebuck*, when he said: "I can solemnly declare that the getting and taking care of my men has given me more trouble and uneasiness than all the rest of my duty."¹

Commanders of smaller and less effective ships

¹ *Ad. I.* 1478—Capt. Brett, 27 Oct. 1742.

found themselves on the horns of a cruel dilemma did they dare to ask for tenders. Beg and pray as they would, these were rarely allowed them save as a special indulgence or a crying necessity. To most applications from this source the Admiralty opposed a front well calculated "to encourage the others." "If he has not men enough to proceed on service," ran its dictum, "their Lordships will lay up the ship."¹ Faced with the summary loss of his command, their Lordships' high displeasure, and consequent inactivity and half-pay for an indefinite period, the captain whose complement was short, and who could obtain neither men nor tender from the constituted authority, had no option but to put to sea with such hands as he already bore and there beat up for others. This, with their Lordships' gracious permission, he accordingly did, thus adding another unit to the fleet of armed vessels already prowling the Narrow Seas on a similar errand. It can be readily imagined that such commanders were not out for pleasure.

To the great and incessantly active flotilla got together in this way, the regulating captains on shore contributed a further large contingent. Every seaport of consequence had its rendezvous, every seaport rendezvous its amphibious gang or gangs who ranged the adjacent coast for many leagues in swift bottoms whose character and mission often remained wholly unsuspected until some skilful manœuvre laid them aboard their intended victim and brought the gang swarming over her decks, armed to the teeth and resolute to press her crew.

¹ *Ad.* I. 1471—Capt. Boyle, 1 March 1715-6, endorsement, and numerous instances.

We have now three classes of vessels, of varying build, rig, tonnage and armament, engaged in a common endeavour to intercept and take the homing sailor. Let us next see how they were disposed upon the coast.

Tenders from Greenwich and Blackwall ransacked the Thames below bridge as far as Blackstakes in the river Medway, the Nore and the Swin channel. Tenders from Margate, Ramsgate, Deal and Dover watched the lower Thames estuary, swept the Downs, and kept a sharp lookout along the coasts of Kent and Sussex, of Essex and of Norfolk. To these tenders from Lynn dipped their colours off Wells-on-Sea or Cromer, whence they bore away for the mouth of Humber, where Hull tenders took up the running till met by those belonging to Sunderland, Newcastle-upon-Tyne and Shields, which in turn joined up the cordon with others hailing from Leith and the Firth of Forth. Northward of the Forth, away to the extreme Orkneys, and all down the west coast of Scotland through the two Minches and amongst the Hebrides, specially armed sloops from Leith and Greenock made periodic cruises. Greenock tenders, again, united with tenders from Belfast and Whitehaven in a lurking watch for ships making home ports by way of the North Channel; or circled the Isle of Man, ran thence across to Morecambe Bay, and so down the Lancashire coast the length of Formby Head, where the Mersey tenders, alert for the Jamaica trade, relieved them of their vigil. Dublin tenders guarded St. George's Channel, aided by others from Milford Haven and Haverfordwest. Bristol tenders cruised the channel of that name,

keeping a sharp eye on Lundy Island and the Holmes, where shipmasters were wont to play them tricks if they were not watchful. Falmouth and Plymouth tenders guarded the coast from Land's End to Portland Bill, Portsmouth tenders from Portland Bill to Beachy Head, and Folkestone and Dover tenders from Beachy Head to the North Foreland, thus completing the encircling chain. Nor was Ireland forgotten in the general sea-rummage. As a converging point for the great overseas trade-routes it was of prime importance, and tenders hailing from Belfast, Dublin, Waterford, Cork and Limerick, or making those places their chief ports of call, exercised unceasing vigilance over all the coast.

In this general scouring of the coastal waters of the kingdom certain points were of necessity subjected to a much closer surveillance than others. Particularly was this true of the sea routes followed by the East and West India, and the Baltic, Virginia, Newfoundland, Dutch and Greenland trades, where these converged upon such centres of world-commerce as London, Poole, Bristol, Liverpool and the great northern entrepôts on the Forth and Clyde, the Humber and the Tyne. A tender stationed off Poole, when a Newfoundland fish-convoy was expected in, never failed to reap a rich harvest. At Highlake, near the mouth of the Mersey, many a fine haul was made from the sugar and rum-laden Jamaica ships, the privateers and slavers from which Liverpool drew her wealth. Early in the century sloops of war had orders "to cruise between Beechy and the Downs to Impress men out of homeward-bound Merchant Ships," and in 1755 Rodney's lieu-

tenants found the Channel "full of tenders." Except in times of profound peace—few and brief in the century under review—it was rarely or never in any other state. An ocean highway so congested with the winged vehicles of commerce could not escape the constant vigilance of those whose business it was to waylay the inward-bound sailor.

A favourite station in the Channel was "at y^e west end of y^e Isle of Wight, near Hurst Castle," where the watchful tender, having under her eye all ships coming from the westward, as well as all passing through the Needles, could press at pleasure by the simple expedient of sending gangs aboard of them. At certain times of the year such ports as Grimsby, Great Yarmouth, Lowestoft and Brixham came in for similar attention. When the fleets were due back from the "Great Fishery" on the Dogger Banks, tenders cruising off those ports netted more men than they could find room for; and so heavy was the tribute paid in this way by the fishermen of the last-named port in 1805, that "not a single man was to be found in Brixham liable to the impress." Every unprotected man, out of a total of ninety-six fishing-smacks then belonging to the place, had been snapped up by the tenders and ships of war cruising off the bay or further up-Channel.¹

The double cordon composed of ships and tenders on the cruise by no means exhausted the resources called into play for the intercepting of the sailor afloat. Still nearer the land was a third or innermost line composed of boat-gangs operating, like so many of

¹ *Ad. I.* 581—Admiral Berkeley, Report on Rendezvous, 15 Sept. 1805.

the tenders, from rendezvous on shore, or from ships of war lying in dock or riding at anchor. Less continuous than the outer cordon, it was not less effective, and many a sailor who by strategy or good luck had all but won through, struck his flag to the gang when perhaps only the cast of a line separated him from shore and liberty.

It was across the entrance to harbours and navigable estuaries that this innermost line was most frequently and most successfully drawn. Pill, the pilot station for the port of Bristol, threw out such a line to the further bank of Avon and thereby caught many an able seaman who had evaded the tenders below King Road. On Southampton Water it was generally so impassable that few men who could in the slightest degree be considered liable to the press escaped its toils.¹ Dublin Bay knew it well. A press "on float" there, carried out silently and swiftly in the grey of a September morning, 1801, whilst the mists still hung thick over the water, resulted in the seizure of seventy-four seamen who had eluded the press-smacks cruising without the bay; but of this number two proving to be protected apprentices, the Lord Mayor sent the Water Bailiff of the city, "with a detachment of the army," and took them by force out of the hands of the gang.² On the Thames, notwithstanding the ceaseless activity of the outer cordons, the innermost line of capture yielded enormously. The night of October the 28th, 1776, saw three hundred and ninety-nine men, the greater part

¹ *Ad. I.* 581—Admiral Berkeley, Report on Rendezvous, 5 Aug. 1805.

² *Ad. I.* 1526—Capt. Brabazon, 16 Sept. 1801.

of them good seamen, pressed by the boats of a single ship—the *Princess Augusta*, Captain Sir Richard Bickerton commander, then fitting out at Woolwich.¹ Such a raid was very properly termed a “hot press.”

The amazing feature of this exploit is, that it should have been possible at all, in view of what was going on in the Thames estuary below a line drawn across the river's mouth from Foulness to Sheerness-reach. Seawards of this line lay the two most famous anchorages in the world, where ships foregathered from every quarter of the navigable globe. Than the Nore and the Downs no finer recruiting-ground could anywhere be found, and here the shore-gangs afloat, and the boat-gangs from ships of war, were for ever on the alert. No ship, whether inward or outward bound, could pass the Nore without being visited. Nothing went by unsearched.² The wonder is that any unprotected sailor ever found his way to London.

Between the Nore and the North Foreland the conditions were equally rigorous. Through all the channels leading to the sea, channels affording anchorage to innumerable ships of every conceivable rig and tonnage, the gangs roamed at will, exacting toll of everything that carried canvas. Even the smaller craft left high and dry upon the flats, or awaiting the tide in some sand-girt pool, did not escape their hawk-like vigilance.

In the Downs these conditions reached their climax, for thither, in never-ending procession, came the larger ships which were so fruitful of good hauls.

¹ *Ad.* i. 1497—Capt. Bickerton, 29 Oct. 1776.

² *Ad.* i. 2733—Capt. Young, 7 March 1756.



SEIZING A WATERMAN ON TOWER HILL ON THE
MORNING OF HIS WEDDING DAY.

With the wind at north, or between north and east, few ships came in and little could be done. But when the wind veered and came piping out of the west or sou'-west, in they came in such numbers that the gangs, however numerous they might be, had all their work cut out to board them. A special tender, swift and exceedingly well-found, was accordingly stationed here, whose duty it was to be "very watchful that no vessel passed without a visit from the impress boats."¹ In such work as this man-o'-war boats were of little use. Just as they could not negotiate Deal beach without danger of being reduced to matchwood, so they could not live in the choppy sea kicked up in the Downs by a westerly gale. Folkstone market boats and Deal cutters had to be requisitioned for pressing in those waters. Their seaworthiness and speed made the Downs the crux of inward-bound ships, whose only means of escaping their attentions was to incur another danger by "going back of the Goodwins."

The procedure of boat-gangs pressing in harbour or on rivers seldom varied, unless it were by accident. As a rule, night was the time selected, for to catch the sailor asleep conduced greatly to the success and safety of the venture. The hour chosen was consequently either close upon midnight, some little time after he had turned in, or in the early morning before he turned out. The darker the night and the dirtier the weather the better. Surprise, swiftly and silently carried out, was half the battle.

A case in point is the attempt made by Lieut.

¹ *Ad. I.* 2733—Orders of Vice-Admiral Buckle to Capt. Yates, 29 April 1778.

Rudsdale, of H.M.S. *Licorne*, "to impress all men (without exception) from the ships and vessels lying at Cheek Point above Passage of Waterford," in the year '79. Putting-off in the pinnace with a picked crew at eleven o'clock on a dark and tempestuous October night, he had scarcely left the ship astern ere he overtook a boatload of men, how many he could not well discern in the darkness, pulling in the direction he himself was bound. Fearful lest they should suspect the nature of his errand and alarm the ships at Passage, he ran alongside of them and pressed the entire number, sending the boat adrift. Putting back, he set his capture on board the *Licorne* and once more turned the nose of the pinnace towards Passage. There, dropping noiselessly aboard the *Triton* brig, he caught the hands asleep, pressed as many of them as he had room for, and with them returned to the ship. Meanwhile, the master of the *Triton* armed what hands he had left and met Rudsdale's second attempt to board him with a formidable array of handspikes, hatchets and crowbars. A fusillade of bottles and billets of wood further evinced his determination to protect the brig against all comers, and lest there should be any doubt on that point he swore roundly that he would be the death of every man in the pinnace if they did not immediately sheer off and leave him in peace. This the lieutenant wisely did. No further surprises were possible that night, for by this time the alarm had spread, the pinnace was half-full of missiles, and one of his men lay in the bottom of her severely wounded.¹ As it was, he had a very fair night's work to his credit. Between the occupants

¹ *Ad. I.* 471—Deposition of Lieut. Rudsdale, 24 Oct. 1779.

of the boat and those of the brig he had obtained close upon a score of men.

The expedients resorted to by commanders of ships of war temporarily in port and short of their tale of men are vividly depicted in a report made to the Admiralty in 1711. "Three days ago, very privately," writes Capt. Billingsley, whose ship, the *Vanguard*, was then lying at Blackstakes, "I Sent two fishing Smacks with a Lieutenant and some Men, with orders to proceede along the Essex Coast, and downe as far as the Wallet, to the Naze, with directions to take all the men out of Oyster Vessels and others that were not Exempted. The project succeeded, and they are return'd with fourteen men, all fit, and but one has ever been in the Service. The coast was Alarm'd, and the country people came downe and fir'd from the Shore upon the Smacks, and no doubt but they doe still take 'em to be privateers."¹

Pressing at sea differed materially in many of its aspects from pressing on the more sheltered waters of rivers and harbours. Carried out as a rule in the broad light of day, it was for that very reason accompanied with a more open and determined display of force than those quieter ventures which depended so largely for their success upon the element of surprise. Situated as we are in these latter days, when anyone who chooses may drive his craft from Land's End to John o' Groats without hindrance, it is difficult to conceive that there was ever a time when the whole extent of the coastal waters of the kingdom, as ranged by the impress tender, was under rigorous martial law. Yet such was unquestionably the case. Throughout

¹ *Ad.* I. 1470—Capt. Billingsley, 5 May 1711.

the eighteenth century the flag was everywhere in armed evidence in those waters, and no sailing master of the time could make even so much as a day's run with any certainty that the peremptory summons: "Bring to! I'm coming aboard of you," would not be bawled at him from the mouth of a gun.

The retention of the command of a tender depended entirely upon her success in procuring men. As a rule, she was out for no other purpose, and this being so, it is not to be supposed that the officer in charge of her would do otherwise than employ the means ordained for that end. Accordingly, as soon as a sail was sighted by the tender's lookout man, a gun was loaded, shotted with roundshot, and run out ready for the moment when the vessel should come within range.

The first intimation the intended victim had of the fate in store for her was the shriek of the roundshot athwart her bows. This was the signal, universally known as such, for her to back her topsails and await the coming of the gang, already tumbling in ordered haste into the armed boat prepared for them under the tender's quarter. And yet it was not always easy for the sprat to catch the whale. A variety of factors entered into the problem and made for failure as often as for success. Sometimes the tender's powder was bad—so bad that in spite of an extra pound or so added to the charge, the shot could not be got to carry as far as a common musket ball.¹ When this was the case her commander suffered a double mortification. His shot, the symbol of authority and coercion, took the water far short of its destined goal,

¹ *Ad.* 1. 2485—Capt. Shirley, 5 Nov. 1780, and numerous instances.

whilst the vessel it was intended to check and intimidate surged by amid the derisive cat-calls and laughter of her crew.

Even with the powder beyond reproach, ships did not always obey the summons, peremptory though it was. One pretended not to hear it, or to misunderstand it, or to believe it was meant for some other craft, and so held stolidly on her course, vouchsafing no sign till a second shot, fired point-blank, but at a safe elevation, hurtled across her decks and brought her to her senses. Another, perhaps some well-armed Levantine trader or tall Indiaman whose crew had little mind to strike their colours submissively at the behest of a midget press-smack, would pipe to quarters and put up a stiff fight for liberty and the dear delights of London town—a fight from which the tender, supposing her to have accepted the gage of battle, rarely came off victor. Or the challenged ship, believing herself to be the faster craft of the two, clapped on all sail, caught an opportune “slatch of wind,” and showed her pursuer a clean pair of heels, the tender’s guns meanwhile barking away at her until she passed out of range. These were incidents in the chapter of pressing afloat which every tender’s commander was familiar with. Back of them all lay a substantial fact, and on that he relied for his supply of men. There was somehow a magic in the boom of a naval gun that had its due effect upon most shipmasters. They brought-to, however reluctantly, and awaited the pleasure of the gang. But the sailor had still to be reckoned with.

In order to invest the business of taking the sailor with some semblance of legality, it was necessary that

the commander of the tender, in whose name the press-warrant was made out, or one of his two midshipmen, each of whom usually held a similar warrant, should conduct the proceedings in person; and the first duty of this officer, on setting foot upon the deck of the vessel held up in the manner just described, was to order her entire company to be mustered for his inspection. If the master proved civil, this preliminary passed off quickly and with no more confusion than was incidental to a general and hasty rummaging of sea-chests and lockers in search of those magic protections on which hung the immediate destiny of every man in the ship, excepting only the skipper, his mate and that privileged person, the boatswain. The muster effected, the officer next subjected each protection to the closest possible scrutiny, for none who knew the innate trickery of seamen would ever "take their words for it."¹ Men who had no protections, men whose papers bore evident traces of "coaxing" or falsification, men whose appearance and persons failed to tally exactly with the description there written down—these were set apart from their more fortunate messmates, to be dealt with presently. To their ranks were added others whose protections had either expired or were on the point of expiry, as well as skulkers who sought to evade His Majesty's press by stowing themselves away between or below decks, and who had been by this time more or less thoroughly routed out by members of the gang armed with hangers. The two contingents now lined up, and their total was checked by reference to the ship's articles, the officer never

¹ *Ad. I.* 1482—Capt. Boscawen, 20 March 1745-6.

omitting to make affectionate inquiries after men marked down as "run," "drowned," or "discharged"; for none knew better than he, if an old hand at the game, how often the "run" man ran no further afield than some secure hiding-place overlooked by his gangers, or how miraculously the "drowned" bobbed up once more to the surface of things when the gang had ceased from troubling. If the ship happened to be an inward-bound, and to possess a general protection exempting her from the press only for the voyage then just ending, that fact greatly simplified and abbreviated the proceedings, for then her whole company was looked upon as the ganger's lawful prey. In the case of an outward-bound ship, the gang-officer's duty was confined to seeing that she carried no more hands than her protection and tonnage permitted her to carry. All others were pressed. Cowed by armed authority, or wounded and bleeding in a lost cause as hereafter to be related, the men were hustled into the boat with "no more violence than was necessary for securing them."¹ Their chests and bedding followed, making a full boat; and so, having cleared the ship of all her pressable hands, the gang prepared to return to the tender. But first there was a last stroke of business to be done. The gunner must have his bit.

Up to this point, beyond producing the ship's papers for inspection and gruffly answering such questions as were put to him, the master of the vessel had taken little part in what was going on. His turn now came. By virtue of his position he could not be pressed, but there existed a very ancient naval usage

¹ *Ad. I.* 1437—Capt. Aldred, 12 June 1708.

according to which he could be, and was, required to pay for the powder and shot expended in inducing him to receive the gang on board. In law the exaction was indefensible. Litigation often followed it, and as the century grew old the practice for that reason fell into gradual desuetude, a circumstance almost universally deplored by naval commanders of the old school,¹ who were ever sticklers for respect to the flag; but during the first five or six decades of the century the shipmaster who had to be fired upon rarely escaped paying the shot. The money accruing from his compliance with the demand, 6s. 8d., went to the gunner, whose perquisite it was, and as several shots were frequently necessary to reduce a crew to becoming submissiveness, the gunners must have done very well out of it. Refusal to "pay the shot" could be visited upon the skipper only indirectly. Another man or two were taken out of him by way of reprisals, and the press-boat shoved off—to return a second, or even a third time, if the pressed men numbered more than she could stow.

From this summary mode of depriving a ship of a part or the whole of her crew two serious complications arose, the first of which had to do with the wages of the men pressed, the second with what was technically called "carrying the ship up," that is to say, sailing her to her destination.

According to the law of the land, the sailor who was pressed out of a ship was entitled to his wages in full till the day he was pressed, and not only was every shipmaster bound to provide such men with

¹ *Ad.* i. 1511—Capt. Bowen, 13 Oct. 1795, and Admiralty endorsement.

tickets good for the sums severally due to them, tickets drawn upon the owners and payable upon demand, but it was the duty of every impress officer to see that such tickets were duly made out and delivered to the men. Refusal to comply with the law in this respect led to legal proceedings, in which, except in the case of foreign ships, the Admiralty invariably won. Eminently fair to the sailor, the provision was desperately hard on masters and owners, for they, after having shipped their crews for the run or voyage, now found themselves left either with insufficient hands to carry the ship up, or with no hands at all. As a concession to the necessity of the moment a gang was sometimes put on board a ship for the avowed purpose of pressing her hands when she arrived in port; but such concessions were not always possible,¹ and common equity demanded that in their absence ample provision should be made for the safety of vessels suddenly disabled by the gang. This the Admiralty undertook to do, and hence there grew up that appendage to the impress afloat generally known as "men in lieu" or "ticket men."

The vocation of the better type "man in lieu" was

¹ Nor were they always effective, as witness the following: "Tuesday the 15th, the *Shandois* sloop from Holland came by this place (the Nore). I put 15 men on b^d her to secure her Comp^y till their Protection was expired. Soon after came from Sheerness the Master Attendant's boat to assist me on that service. I immediately sent her away with more Men and Armes for the better Securing of the Sloop's Company, but that night, in Longreach, the Vessel being near the Shore, and almost Calme, they hoisted the boat out to tow the Sloop about, and all the Sloop's men, being 18, got into her and Run ashore, bidding defiance to my people's fireing."—*Ad.* 1. '1473—Capt. Boulter, H.M.S. *Argyle*, 18 Feb. 1725-6.

a vicarious sort of employment, entailing any but disagreeable consequences upon him who followed it. At every point on the coast where a gang was stationed, and at many where they were not, great numbers of these men were retained for service afloat whenever required. The three ports of Dover, Deal and Folkestone alone at one time boasted no less than four hundred and fifty of them, and when a hot press was in full swing in the Downs even this number was found insufficient to meet the demand. Mostly fishermen, Sea-Fencibles and others of a quasi-seafaring type, they enjoyed complete exemption from the impress as a consideration for "going in pressed men's rooms," received a shilling, and in some cases eighteen-pence a day while so employed, and had a penny a mile road-money for their return to the place of their abode, where they were free, in the intervals between carrying ships up, to follow any longshore occupation they found agreeable, save only smuggling. The enjoyment of these privileges, and particularly the privilege of exemption from the press, made them, as a class, notorious for their independence and insolence—characteristics which still survive in not a few of their descendants. Tenders going a-pressing often bore a score or two of these privileged individuals as supers, who were drafted into ships, as the crews were taken out, to assist the master, mate and few remaining hands, were any of the latter left, in carrying them up. Or, if no supers of this class were borne by the tender, she "loaned" the master a sufficient number of her own company, duly protected by tickets from the commanding officer, and invariably the most unserviceable people on board, to work the ship into the

nearest port where regular "men in lieu" could be obtained.

Had all "men in lieu" conformed to the standard of the better class substitute of that name, the system would have been laudable in the extreme and trade would have suffered little inconvenience from the depredations of the gangs; but there was in the system a flaw that generally reduced the aid lent to ships to something little better than a mere travesty of assistance. That flaw lay in the fact that Admiralty never gave as good as it took. Clearly, it could not. True, it supplied substitutes to go in "pressed men's rooms," but to call them "*men* in lieu" was a gross abuse of language. In reality the substitutes supplied were in the great majority of cases mere scum in lieu, the unpressable residuum of the population, consisting of men too old or lads too young to appeal to the cupidity of the gangs, poor creatures whom the regulating captains had refused, useless on land and worse than useless at sea.

In the general character of the persons sent in pressed men's rooms Admiralty thus had Trade on the hip, and Trade suffered much in consequence. More than one rich merchantman, rusty from long voyaging, strewed the coast with her cargo and timbers because all the able seamen had been taken out of her, and none better than old men and boys could be found to sail her. Few seaport towns were as wise as Sunderland, where they had a Society of Shipowners for mutual insurance against the risks arising from the pressing of their men.¹ Elsewhere masters, owners and underwriters groaned under the

¹ *Ad. I.* 1541—Capt. Bligh, 8 Jan. 1807, enclosure.

galling imposition ; but the wrecker rejoiced exceedingly, thanking the gangs whose ceaseless activities rendered such an outrageous state of things possible.

Whichever of these two classes the ticket man belonged to, he was an incorrigible deserter. "Thirteen out of the fifteen men in lieu that I sent up in the *Beaufort* East-Indiaman," writes the disgusted commander of the *Comet* bombship, from the Downs, "have never returned. As they are not worth inquiring for, I have made them run."¹ Such instances might be multiplied indefinitely. Once the ticket man had drawn his money for the trip, there was no such thing as holding him. The temptation to spend his earnings in town proved too strong, and he went on the spree with great consistency and enjoyment till his money was gone and his protection worthless, when the inevitable overtook him. The ubiquitous gang deprived him of his only remaining possession, his worthless liberty, and sent him to the fleet, a ragged but shameless derelict, as a punishment for his breach of privilege.

The protecting ticket carried by the man in lieu dated from 1702, when it appears to have been first instituted ;² but even when the bearer was no deserter in fact or intention, it had little power to protect him. No ticket man could count upon remaining unmolested by the gangs except the undoubted foreigner and the marine, both of whom were much used as men in lieu. The former escaped because his

¹ *Ad.* 1. 1478—Capt. Burvill, 4 Sept. 1742. A man-o'-war's-man was "made run" when he failed to return to his ship after a reasonable absence and an *R* was written over against his name on the ship's books.

² *Ad.* 1. 1433—Capt. Anderson, 5 April 1702.

alien tongue provided him with a natural protection ; the latter because he was reputedly useless on ship-board. In the person of the marine, indeed, the man in lieu achieved the climax of ineptitude.

It was an ironical rule of the service that persons refusing to act as men in lieu should suffer the very fate they stood in so much danger of in the event of their consenting. Broadstairs fishermen in 1803 objected to serving in that capacity, though tendered the exceptional wage of 27s. for the run to London. "If not compelled to go in that way," they alleged, "they could make their own terms with shipmasters and have as many guineas as they were now offered shillings." Orders to press them for their contumacy were immediately sent down.¹

By the year 1811 the halcyon days of the man in lieu were at an end. As a class he was then practically extinct. Inveterate and long-continued pressing had drained the merchant service of all able-bodied British seamen except those who were absolutely essential to its existence. These were fully protected, and when their number fell short of the requirements of the service the deficiency was supplied by foreigners and apprentices similarly exempt. So few pressable men were to be found in any one ship that it was no longer considered necessary to send ticket men in their stead when they were taken out, and as a matter of fact less than a dozen such men were that year put on board ships passing the Downs.² Pressing itself was in its decline,

¹ *Ad.* 1. 1450—Capt. Carter, 16 Aug. 1803.

² *Ad.* 1. 1453—Capt. Anderson, 31 Aug. 1811.

and as for the vocation of the man in lieu, it had gone never to return.

Ships and tenders out for men met with varied fortunes. In the winter season the length of the nights, the tempestuous weather and the cold told heavily against success, as did at all times that factor in the problem which one old sea-dog so picturesquely describes as "the room there is for missing you." Capt. Barker, of the *Thetis*, in 1748 made a haul of thirty men off the Old-Head of Kinsale, but lost his barge in doing so, "it blowed so hard." Byng, of the *Sutherland*, grumbled atrociously because in the course of his run up-Channel in '42 he was able to press "no more than seventeen." Anson, looking quite casually into Falmouth on his way down-Channel, found there in '46 the *Betsey* tender, then just recently condemned, and took out of her every man she possessed at the cost of a mere hour's work, ignorant of the fact that when pressing eight of those men the commander of the *Betsey* had been "eight hours about it." It was all a game of chance, and when you played it the only thing you could count upon was the certainty of having both the sailor and the elements dead against you.

But if the "room there is for missing you," conspiring with other unfavourable conditions, rendered pressing afloat an uncertain and vexatious business, the chances of making a haul were on the other hand augmented by every ship that entered or left the Narrow Seas, not even excepting the foreigner. The foreign sailor could not be pressed unless, as we have seen, he had naturalised himself by marrying an English wife, but the foreign ship was fair game for



JACK IN THE BILBOES.

every hunter of British seamen. An ancient assumption of right made it so.

From the British point of view the "Right of Search" was an eminently reasonable thing. Here was an island people to whose keeping Heaven had by special dispensation committed the dominion of the seas. To defend that dominion they needed every seaman they possessed or could produce. They could spare none to other nations; and when their sailors, who enjoyed no rights under their own flag, had the temerity to seek refuge under another, there was nothing for it but to fire on that flag if necessary, and to take the refugee by armed force from under its protection. This in effect constituted the time-honoured "Right of Search," and none were so reluctant to forego the prerogative, or so keen to enforce it, as those naval officers who saw in it a certain prospect of adding to their ships' companies. The right of search was always good for another man or two.

It was often good for a great many more, for the foreign skipper was at the best an arrant man-stealing rogue. If a Yankee, he hated the British because he had beaten them; if a Frenchman or a Hollander, because they had beaten him. His animus was all against the British Navy, his sympathies all in favour of the British sailor, in whom he recognised as good, if not a better seaman than himself. He accordingly enticed him with the greatest pertinacity and hid him away with the greatest cunning.

Every impress officer worth his salt was fully alive to these facts, and on all the coast no ship was so thoroughly ransacked as the ship whose skipper

affected a bland ignorance of the English tongue or called Heaven to witness the blamelessness of his conduct with many gesticulations and strange oaths. Lieut. Oakley, regulating officer at Deal, once boarded an outward-bound Dutch East-Indiaman in the Downs. The master strenuously denied having any English sailors on board, but the lieutenant, being suspicious, sent his men below with instructions to leave no part of the ship unsearched. They speedily routed out three, "who discovered that there were in all thirteen on board, most of them good and able seamen."¹ The case is a typical one.

Another source of joy and profit to the gangs afloat were the great annual convoys from overseas. For safety's sake merchantmen in times of hostilities sailed in fleets, protected by ships of war, and when a fleet of this description was due back from Jamaica, Newfoundland or the Baltic, that part of the coast where it might be expected to make its land-fall literally swarmed with tenders, all on the *qui vive* for human plunder. They were seldom disappointed. The Admiralty protections under which the ships had put to sea in the first instance expired with the home voyage, leaving the crews at the mercy of the gangs. If, that is to say, the commanders of the convoying men-o'-war had not forestalled them, or the ships' companies were not composed, as in one case we read of, of men who were all "either sick or Dutchmen."

The privateer had to be approached more warily than the merchantman, since the number of men and the weight of metal she carried made her an ugly customer to deal with. She was in consequence

¹ *Ad.* 1. 3363—Lieut. Oakley, 8 Dec. 1743.

notorious for being the sauciest craft afloat, and though "sauce" was to the naval officer what a red rag is to a bull, there were few in the service who did not think twice before attempting to violate the armed sanctity of the privateer. At the same time the hands who crowded her deck were the flower of British seamen, and in this fact lay a tremendous incentive to dare all risks and press her men. Her commission or letter of marque of course protected her, but when she was inward-bound that circumstance carried no weight.

Against such an adversary the tender stood little chance. When she hailed the privateer, the latter laughed at her, threatening to sink her out of hand, or, if ordered to bring to, answered with all the insolent contempt of the Spanish grandee: "Mañana!" Accident sometimes stood the tender in better stead, where the pressing of privateer's-men was concerned, than all the guns she carried. Capt. Adams, cruising for men in the Bristol Channel, one day fell in with the *Princess Augusta*, a letter of marque whose crew had risen upon their officers and tried to take the ship. After hard fighting the mutiny was quelled and the mutineers confined to quarters, in which condition Adams found them. The whole batch, twenty-nine in number, was handed over to him, "though 'twas only with great threats" that he could induce them to submit, "they all swearing to die to a man rather than surrender."¹

A year or two prior to this event this same ship, the *Princess Augusta*, had a remarkable adventure whilst sailing under the merchant flag of England.

¹ *Ad. I.* 1440—Capt. Adams, 28 June 1745.

On the homeward run from Barbadoes, some fifty leagues to the westward of the Scillies, she fell in with a Spanish privateer, who at once engaged and would undoubtedly have taken her but for an extraordinary occurrence. Just as the trader's assailants were on the point of boarding her the Spaniard blew up, strewing the sea with his wreckage, but leaving the merchantman providentially unharmed. Capt. Dansays, of H.M.S. the *Fubbs* yacht, who happened to be out for men at the time in the chops of the Channel, brought the news to England. Meeting with the trader a few days after her miraculous escape, he had boarded her and pressed nine of her crew.¹

From the smuggling vessels infesting the coasts the sea-going gangs drew sure returns and rich booty. In the south and east of England people who were "in the know" could always buy tobacco, wines and silks for a mere song; and in Cumberland, in the coast towns there, and inland too, the very beggars are said to have regaled themselves on tea at sixpence or a shilling the pound. These commodities, as well as others dealt in by runners of contrabrand, were worth far more on the water than on land, and none was so keenly alive to the fact as the gangster who prowled the coast. Animated by the prospect of double booty, he was by all odds the best "preventive man" the country ever had.

There was a certainty, too, about the pressing of a smuggler that was wanting in other cases. The sailor taken out of a merchant ship, or the fisherman out of a smack, might at the eleventh hour spring

¹ *Ad. I.* 1439—Capt. Ambrose, 7 Feb. 1741-2.

upon you a protection good for his discharge. Not so the smuggler. There was in his case no room for the unexpected. No form of protection could save him from the consequences of his trade. Once caught, his fate was a foregone conclusion, for he carried with him evidence enough to make him a pressed man twenty times over. Hence the gangster and the naval officer loved the smuggler and lost no opportunity of showing their affection.

"Strong Breezes and Cloudy," records the officer in command of H.M.S. *Stag*, a twenty-eight gun frigate, in his log. "Having made the Signal for Two Strange Sail in the West, proceeded on under Courses & Double Reef't Topsails. At 1 sett the Jibb and Driver, at 3 boarded a Smugling Cutter, but having papers proving she was from Guernsey, and being out limits, pressed one Man and let her go."¹

"Friday last," says the captain of the *Spy* sloop of war, "I sail'd out of Yarmouth Roads with a Fleet of Colliers in order to press Men, & in my way fell in with Two Dutch Built Scoots sail'd by Englishmen, bound for Holland, one belonging to Hull, call'd the *Mary*, the other to Lyn, call'd the *Willing Traveller*. I search'd 'em and took out of the former £64 14, and out of the latter £30 0 6, all English Money, which I've deliver'd to the Collector of Custome at Yarmouth. I likewise Imprest out of the Two Vessells seven men."²

"In the execution of my orders for pressing," reports Capt. Young, from on board the *Bonetta* sloop

¹ *Ad.* I. 2734—Log of H.M.S. *Stag*, Capt. Yorke commander, 5 Oct. 1794.

² *Ad.* I. 1438—Capt. Arnold, 29 May 1727. The exporting of coin was illegal.

under his command, "I lately met with two Smuglers, & landing my boats into a Rocky Bay where they were running of Goods, the Weather came on so Violent I had my pinnace Stove so much as to be rendered unservisable. They threw overboard all their Brandy, Tea and Tobacco, of which last wee recover'd about 14 Baggs and put it to the Custom house. In Endeavouring to bring one of them to Sail, my Boatswain, who is a very Brisk and Deserving Man, had his arm broke, so that tho' wee got no more of their Cargo, it has broke their Voyage and Trade this bout."¹

On the 13th of December 1703, George Messenger, boatswain of the *Wolf* armed sloop, whilst pressing on the Humber descried a "keel" lying high and dry apart from the other shipping in the river, where it was then low water. Boarding her with the intention of pressing her men, he found her deserted save for the master, and thinking that some of the hands might be in hiding below—where the master assured him he would find nothing but ballast—he "did order one of his Boat's crew to goe down in the Hold and see what was therein"; who presently returned and reported "a quantity of wool conceal'd under some Coales a foot thik." The exportation of wool being at that time forbidden under heavy penalties, the vessel was seized and the master pressed—a course frequently adopted in such circumstances, and uniformly approved.²

¹ *Ad. I.* 2732—Capt. Young, 6 April 1739.

² *Ad. I.* 1465—Deposition of George Messenger, 20 Dec. 1703. Owling, ooling or wooling, as the exportation of wool contrary to law was variously termed, was a felony punishable, according to an enactment of Edward III., with "forfeiture of life and member." So serious

While the gangs afloat in this way lent their aid in the suppression of smuggling, they themselves were sometimes subjected to disagreeable espionage on the part of those whose duty it was to keep a special lookout for runners of contraband goods. An amusing instance of this once occurred in the Downs. The commanding officer of H.M.S. *Orford*, discovering his complement to be short, sent one of his lieutenants, Richardson by name, in quest of men to make up the deficiency. In the course of his visits from ship to ship there somehow found their way into the lieutenant's boat a fifteen-gallon keg of rum and ten bottles of white wine. Between seven and eight o'clock in the evening he boarded an Indiaman and went below with the master. Scarcely had he done so, however, when an uproar alongside brought him hurriedly on deck—to find his boat full of strange faces. A Customs cutter, in some unaccountable way getting wind of what was in the boat, had unexpectedly “clapt them aboard,” collared the man-o'-war's-men for a set of rascally smugglers, and confiscated the unexplainable rum and wine, becoming so fuddled on the latter, which they lost no time in consigning to bond, that one of their number fell into the sea and was with difficulty fished out by Richardson's disgusted gangsmen.¹

was the offence considered that in 1565 a further enactment was formulated against it. Thereafter any person convicted of exporting a live ram, lamb or sheep, was not only liable to forfeit all his goods, but to suffer imprisonment for a year, and at the end of the year “in some open market town, in the fulness of the market on the market day, to have his right hand cut off and nailed up in the openest place of such market.” The first of these Acts remained in nominal force till 1863.

¹ *Ad. 1.* 1473—Capt. Brown, 30 July 1727, and enclosures.

The only inward-bound ship the gangsmen were forbidden to press from was the "sick ship" or vessel undergoing quarantine because of the presence, or the suspected presence, on board of her of some "catching" disease, and more particularly of that terrible scourge the plague. Dread of the plague in those days rode the country like a nightmare, and just as the earliest quarantine precautions had their origin in that fact, so those precautions were never more rigorously enforced than in the case of ships trading to countries known to be subject to plague or reported to be in the grip of it. The Levantine trader suffered most severely in this respect. In 1721 two vessels from Cyprus, where plague was then prevalent, were burned to the water's edge by order of the authorities, and as late as 1800 two others from Morocco, suspected of carrying the dread disease in the hides composing their cargo, were scuttled and sent to the bottom at the Nore. This was quarantine *in excelsis*. Ordinary preventive measures went no further than the withdrawal of "pratique," as communication with the shore was called, for a period varying usually from ten to sixty-five days, and during this period no gang was allowed to board the ship.

The seamen belonging to such ships always got ashore if they could; for though the penalty for deserting a ship in quarantine was death,¹ it might be death to remain, and the sailor was ever an opportunist careless of consequences. So, for that matter, was the gangsmen. Knowing well that Jack would make a break for it the first chance he got, he hovered about the ship both day and night, alert for

¹ 26 George II. cap. 6.

every movement on board, watchful of every ripple on the water, taunting the woebegone sailors with the irksomeness of their captivity or the certainty of their capture, and awaiting with what patience he could the hour that should see pratique restored and the crew at his mercy. Whether the ship had "catching" disease on board or not might be an open question. There was no mistaking its symptoms in the gangster.

Stangate Creek, on the river Medway, was the great quarantine station for the port of London, and here, in the year 1744, was enacted one of the most remarkable scenes ever witnessed in connection with pressing afloat. The previous year had seen a recrudescence of plague in the Levant and consequent panic in England, where extraordinary precautions were adopted against possible infection. In December of that year there lay in Stangate Creek a fleet of not less than a dozen Levantine ships, in which were cooped up, under the most exacting conditions imaginable, more than two hundred sailors. At Sheerness, only a few miles distant, a number of ships of war, amongst them Rodney's, were at the same time fitting out and wanting men. The situation was thus charged with possibilities.

It was estimated that in order to press the two hundred sailors from the quarantine ships, when the period of detention should come to an end, a force of not less than one hundred and fifty men would be required. These were accordingly got together from the various ships of war and sent into the Creek on board a tender belonging to the *Royal Sovereign*. This was on the 15th of December, and quarantine expired on the 22nd.

The arrival of the tender threw the Creek into a state of consternation bordering on panic, and that very day a number of sailors broke bounds and fell a prey to the gangs in attempting to steal ashore. Seymour, the lieutenant in command of the tender, did not improve matters by his idiotic and unofficer-like behaviour. Every day he rowed up and down the Creek, in and out amongst the ships, taunting the men with what he would do unless they volunteered, when the 22nd arrived, and he was free to work his will upon them. He would have them all, he assured them, if he had to "shoot them like small birds."

By the 22nd the sailors were in a state of "mutinous insolence." When the tender's boats approached the ships they were welcomed "with presented arms," and obliged to sheer off in order to obtain "more force," so menacing did the situation appear. Seeing this, and either mistaking or guessing the import of the move, the desperate seamen rushed the cabins, secured all the arms and ammunition they could lay hands on, hoisted out the ship's boats, and in these reached the shore in safety ere the tender's men, by this time out in strength, could prevent or come up with them. The fugitives, to the number of a hundred or more, made off into the country to the accompaniment, we are told, of "smart firing on both sides." With this exchange of shots the curtain falls on the "Fray at Stangate Creek."¹ In the engagement two of the seamen were wounded, but all escaped the snare of the fowler, and in that happy denouement our sympathies are with them.

Returning transports paid immediate and heavy

¹ *Ad.* 1. 1480—Capt. Berkeley, 30 Dec. 1744, and enclosure.

tribute to the gangs afloat. Out of a fleet of such vessels arriving at the Nore in 1756 two hundred and thirty men, "a parcel of as fine fellows as were ever pressed," fell to the gangs. Not a man escaped from any of the ships, and the boats were kept busy all next day shifting chests and bedding and putting in ticket men to navigate the depleted vessels to London.¹ A similar press at the Cove of Cork, on the return of the transports from America in '79, proved equally productive. Hundreds of sailors were secured, to the unspeakable grief of the local crimps, who were then offering long prices in order to recruit Paul Jones, at that time cruising off the Irish coast.²

The cartel ship was an object of peculiar solicitude to the sea-going gangster. In her, after weary months passed in French, Spanish or Dutch prisons, hundreds of able-bodied British seamen returned to their native land in more or less prime condition for His Majesty's Navy. The warmest welcome they received was from the waiting gangster. Often they got no other. Few cartels had the extraordinary luck of the ship of that description that crept into Rye harbour one night in March 1800, and in bright moonlight landed three hundred lusty sailor-men fresh from French prisons, under the very nose of the battery, the guard at the port head and the *Clinker* gun-brig.³

Of all the seafaring men the gangster took, there was perhaps none whom he pressed with greater relish than the pilot. The every-day pilot of the old school

¹ *Ad. I.* 1487—Capt. Boys, 6, 7 and 8 July 1756.

² *Ad. I.* 1499—Letters of Capt. Bennett, 1779.

³ *Ad. I.* 1449—Capt. Aylmer, 9 March 1800.

was a curious compound. When he knew his business, which was only too seldom, he was frequently too many sheets in the wind to embody his knowledge in intelligent orders ; and when he happened to be sober enough to issue intelligent orders, he not infrequently showed his ignorance of what he was supposed to know by issuing wrong ones. The upshot of these contradictions was, that instead of piloting His Majesty's ships in a becoming seamanly manner, he was for ever running them aground. Fortunately for the service, an error of this description incapacitated him and made him fair game for the gangs, who lost no time in transferring him to those foremast regions where ship's grog was strictly limited and the captain's quite unknown. William Cook, impressed upon an occasion at Lynn, with unconscious humour styled himself a landsman. He was really a pilot who had qualified for that distinction by running vessels ashore.

In the aggregate this unremitting and practically unbroken surveillance of the coast was tremendously effective. Like Van Tromp, the vessels and gangs engaged in it rode the seas with a broom at their masthead, sweeping into the service, not every man, it is true, but enormous numbers of them. As for their quality, "One man out of a merchant ship is better than three the lieutenants get in town."¹ This was the general opinion early in the century ; but as the century wore on the quality of the man pressed in town steadily deteriorated, till at length the sailor taken fresh from the sea was reckoned to be worth six of him.

¹ *Ad. I.* 2379—Capt. Roberts, 27 June 1732.

CHAPTER VI

EVADING THE GANG

As we have just seen, it was when returning from overseas that the British sailor ran the gravest risk of summary conversion into Falstaff's famous commodity, "food for powder."

Outward bound, the ship's protection—that "sweet little cherub" which, contrary to all Dibdinic precedent, lay down below—had spread its kindly ægis over him, and, generally speaking, saved him harmless from the warrant and the hanger. But now the run for which he has signed on is almost finished, and as the Channel opens before him the magic Admiralty paper ceases to be of "force" for his protection. No sooner, therefore, does he make his land-fall off the fair green hills or shimmering cliffs than his troubles begin. He is now within the outer zone of danger, and all about him hover those dreaded sharks of the Narrow Seas, the rapacious press-smacks, seeking whom they may devour. Conning the compass-card of his chances as they bear down upon him and send their shot whizzing across his bows, the sailor, in his fixed resolve to evade the gang at any cost, resorted first of all to the most simple and sailorly expedient imaginable. He "let go all" and made a run for it. That way lay the line

of least resistance, and, with luck on his side, of surest escape.

Three modes of flight were his to choose between—three modes involving as many nice distinctions, plus a possible difference with the master. He could run away *in* his ship, run away *with* her, or as a last resort he could sacrifice his slops, his bedding, his pet monkey and the gaudy parrot that was just beginning to swear, and run *from* her. Which should it be? It was all a toss-up. The chance of the moment, instantly detected and as instantly acted upon, determined his choice.

The sailor's flight *in* his ship depended mainly upon her sailing qualities and the master's willingness to risk being dismasted or hulled by the pursuer's shot. Granted a capful of wind on his beam, a fleet keel under foot, and a complacent skipper aft, the flight direct was perhaps the means of escape the sailor loved above all others. The spice of danger it involved, the dash and frolic of the chase, the joy of seeing his leaping "barky" draw slowly away from her pursuer in the contest of speed, and of watching the stretch of water lying between him and capture surely widen out, were sensations dear to his heart.

Running away *with* his ship was a more serious business, since the adoption of such a course meant depriving the master of his command, and this again meant mutiny. Happily, masters took a lenient view of mutinies begotten of such conditions. Not infrequently, indeed, they were consenting parties, winking at what they could not prevent, and assuming the command again when the safety of ship and crew was assured by successful flight, with never a

hint of the irons, indictment or death decreed by law as the mutineer's portion.

These modes of flight did not in every instance follow the hard-and-fast lines here laid down. Under stress of circumstance each was liable to become merged in the other; or both, perhaps, had to be abandoned in favour of fresh tactics rendered necessary by the accident or the exigency of the moment. The *Triton* and *Norfolk* Indiamen, after successfully running the gauntlet of the Channel tenders, in the Downs fell in with the *Falmouth* man-o'-war. The meeting was entirely accidental. Both merchantmen were congratulating themselves on having negotiated the Channel without the loss of a man. The *Triton* had all furled except her fore and mizen topsails, preparatory to coming to an anchor; but as the wind was strong southerly, with a lee tide running, the *Falmouth's* boats could not forge ahead to board her before the set of the tide carried her astern of the warship's guns, whereupon her crew mutinied, threw shot into the man-o'-war's boats, which had by this time drawn alongside, and so, making sail with all possible speed, got clear away. Meantime a shot had brought the *Norfolk* to on the *Falmouth's* starboard bow, where she was immediately boarded. On her decks an ominous state of things prevailed. Her crew would not assist to clew up the sails, the anchor had been seized to the chain-plates and could not be let go, and when the gang from the *Falmouth* attempted to cut the buoy ropes with which it was secured, the "crew attacked them with hatchets and treenails, made sail and obliged them to quit the ship." Being by that,

time astern of the *Falmouth's* guns, they too made their escape.¹

Never, perhaps, did the sailor adopt the expedient of running away, ship and all, with so malicious a goodwill or so bright a prospect of success, as when sailing under convoy. In those days he seldom ventured to "risk the run," even to Dutch ports and back, without the protection of one or more ships of war, and in this precaution there was danger as well as safety; for although the king's ships safeguarded him against the enemy if hostilities were in progress, as well as against the "little rogues" of privateers infesting the coasts and the adjacent seas, no sooner did the voyage near its end than the captains of the convoying ships took out of him, by force if necessary, as many men as they happened to require. This was a *quid pro quo* of which the sailor could see neither the force nor the fairness, and he therefore let slip no opportunity of evading it.

"Their Lordships," writes a commander who had been thus cheated, "need not be surprised that I pressed so few men out of so large a Convoy, for the Wind taking me Short before I got the length of Leostaff (Lowestoft), the Pilot w^d not take Charge of the Shipp to turn her out over the Stamford in y^e Night, w^{ch} Oblig'd me to come to an Anchor in Corton Road. This I did by Signal, but y^e Convoy took no Notice of it, and all of them Run away and Left me, my Bottom being like a Rock for Roughness, so that I could not Follow them."²

Supposing, however, that all these manœuvres

¹ *Ad.* 1. 1485—Capt. Brett, 25 June 1755.

² *Ad.* 1. 2732—Letters of Capt. Young, 1742.

failed him and the gang after a hot chase appeared in force on deck, the game was not yet up so far as the sailor was concerned. A ship, it is true, had neither the length of the Great North Road nor yet the depth of the Forest of Dean, but all the same there was within the narrow compass of her timbers many a lurking place wherein the artful sailor, by a judicious exercise of forethought and tools, might contrive to lie undetected until the gang had gone over the side.

About five o'clock in the afternoon of the 25th of June 1756, Capt. William Boys, from the quarter-deck of his ship the *Royal Sovereign*, then riding at anchor at the Nore, observed a snow on fire in the five-fathom channel, a little below the Spoil Buoy. He immediately sent his cutter to her assistance, but in spite of all efforts to save her she ran aground and burnt to the water's edge. Her cargo consisted of wine, and the loss of the vessel was occasioned by one of her crew, who was fearful of being pressed, hiding himself in the hold with a lighted candle. He was burnt with the ship.¹

Barring the lighted candle and the lamentable

¹ *Ad. I.* 1487—Capt. Boys, 26 June 1756. Oddly enough, a somewhat similar accident was indirectly the cause of Capt. Boys' entering the Navy. In 1727, whilst the merchantman of which he was then mate was on the voyage home from Jamaica, two mischievous imps of black boys, inquisitive to know whether some liquor spilt on deck was rum or water, applied a lighted candle to it. It proved to be rum, and when the officers and crew, who were obliged to take to the boats in consequence, were eventually picked up by a Newfoundland fishing vessel, unspeakable sufferings had reduced their number from twenty-three to seven, and these had only survived by feeding on the bodies of their dead shipmates. In memory of that harrowing time Boys adopted as his seal the device of a burning ship and the motto: "From Fire, Water and Famine by Providence Preserved."

accident which followed its use, the means of evading the gang resorted to in this instance was of a piece with many adopted by the sailor. He contrived cunning hiding-places in the cargo, where the gangsmen systematically "pricked" for him with their cutlasses when the nature of the vessel's lading admitted of it, or he stowed himself away in seachests, lockers and empty "harness" casks with an ingenuity and thoroughness that often baffled the astutest gangsmen and the most protracted search. The spare sails forward, the readily accessible hiding-hole of the green-hand, afforded less secure concealment. Pierre Flountinherre, routed out of hiding there, endeavoured to save his face by declaring that he had "left France on purpose to get on board an English man-of-war." Frenchman though he was, the gang obliged him.¹

In his endeavours to best the impress officers and gangsmen the sailor found a willing backer in his skipper, who systematically falsified the ship's articles by writing "run," "drowned," "discharged" or "dead" against the names of such men as he particularly desired to save harmless from the press.² This done, the men were industriously coached in the various parts they were to play at the critical moment. In the skipper's stead, supposing him to be for some reason unfit for naval service, some specially valuable hand was dubbed master. Failing this substitution, which was of course intended to save the man and not the skipper, the ablest seaman in the ship figured as mate, whilst others became putative boatswain or

¹ *Ad.* 1. 1510—Capt. Baskerville, 5 Aug. 1795.

² *Ad.* 1. 1525—Capt. Berry, 31 March 1801.

carpenter and apprentices—privileged persons whom no gang could lawfully take, but who, to render their position doubly secure, were furnished with spurious papers, of which every provident skipper kept a supply at hand for use in emergencies. When all hands were finally mustered to quarters, so to speak, there remained on deck only a “master” who could not navigate the ship, a “mate” unable to figure out the day’s run, a “carpenter” who did not know how to handle an adze, and some make-believe apprentices “bound” only to outwit the gang. And if in spite of all these precautions an able seaman were pressed, the real master immediately came forward and swore he was the mate.

Such thoroughly organised preparedness as this, however, was the exception rather than the rule, for though often attempted, it rarely reached perfection or stood the actual test. The sailor was too childlike by nature to play the fraud successfully, and as for the impress officer and the gangster, neither was easily gulled. Supposing the sailor, then, to have nothing to hope for from deception or concealment, and supposing, too, that it was he who had the rough bottom beneath him and the fleet keel in pursuit, how was he to outwit the gang and evade the pinch? Nothing remained for him but to heave duty by the board and abandon his ship to the doubtful mercies of wind and wave. He accordingly went over the side with all the haste he could, appropriating the boats in defiance of authority, and leaving only the master and his mate, the protected carpenter and the apprentices to work the ship. Many a trader from overseas, summarily abandoned in this way, crawled

into some outlying port, far from her destination, in quest—since a rigorous press often left no others available—of “old men and boys to carry her up.” There is even on record the case of a ship that passed the Nore “without a man belonging to her but the master, the passengers helping him to sail her.” Her people had “all got ashore by Harwich.”¹

Few shipowners were so foolhardy as to incur the risk of being thus hit in the pocket by the sailor’s well-known predilection for French leave when in danger of the press. Nor were the masters, for they, even when not part owners, had still an appreciable stake in the safety of the ships they sailed. As between masters, owners and men there consequently sprang up a sort of triangular sympathy, having for its base a common dread of the gangs, and for its apex their circumvention. This apex necessarily touched the coast at a point contiguous to the ocean tracks of the respective trades in which the ships sailed; and here, in some spot far removed from the regular haunts of the gangster, an emergency crew was mustered by those indefatigable purveyors, the crimps, and held in readiness against the expected arrival.

Composed of seafaring men too old, too feeble, or too diseased to excite the cupidity of the most zealous lieutenant who eked out his pay on impress perquisites; of lads but recently embarked on the adventurous voyage of their teens; of pilots willing, for a consideration, to forego the pleasure of running ships aground; of fishermen who evaded His Majesty’s press under colour of Sea-Fencible, Militia,

¹ *Ad. I.* 1473—Capt. Boulter, 18 Feb. 1725-6.

or Admiralty protections; and of unpressable foreigners whose wives bewailed them more or less beyond the seas, this scratch crew—the Preventive Men of the merchant service—here awaited the preconcerted signal which should apprise them that their employer's ship was ready for a change of hands.

For safety's sake the transfer was generally effected by night, when that course was possible; but the untimely appearance of a press-smack on the scene not infrequently necessitated the shifting of the crews in the broad light of day and the hottest of haste. On shore all had been in readiness perhaps for days. At the signal off dashed the deeply laden boats to the frantic ship, the scratch crew scrambled aboard, and the regular hands, thus released from duty, tumbled pell-mell into the empty boats and pulled for shore with a will mightily heartened by a running fire of round-shot from the smack and of musketry from her cutter, already out to intercept the fugitives. Then it was:—

“Cheerily, lads, cheerily! there's a ganger hard to wind'ard;

Cheerily, lads, cheerily! there's a ganger hard a-lee;

Cheerily, lads, cheerily! else 'tis farewell home and kindred,

And the bosun's mate a-raisin' hell in the King's Navee.

Cheerily, lads, cheerily ho! the warrant's out, the hanger's drawn!

Cheerily, lads, so cheerilee! we'll leave 'em an *R* in pawn!”¹

The place of muster of the emergency men thus became in turn the landing-place of the fugitive crew. Its whereabouts depended as a matter of course upon

¹ When Jack deserted his ship under other conditions than those here described, an *R* was written against his name to denote that he had “run.” So, when he shirked an obligation, monetary or moral, by running away from it, he was said to “leave an *R* in pawn.”

the trade in which the ship sailed. The spot chosen for the relief of the Holland, Baltic and Greenland traders of the East Coast was generally some wild, inaccessible part abutting directly on the German Ocean or the North Sea. London skippers in those trades favoured the neighbourhood of Great Yarmouth, where the maze of inland waterways constituting the Broads enabled the shifty sailor to lead the gangs a merry game at hide and seek. King's Lynnners affected Skegness and the Norfolk lip of the Wash. Of the men who sailed out of Hull not one in ten could be picked up, on their return, by the gangs haunting the Humber. They went ashore at Dimlington on the coast of Holderness, or at the Spurn. The homing sailors of Leith, as of the ports on the upper reaches of the Firth of Forth, enjoyed an immunity from the press scarcely less absolute than that of the Orkney Islanders, who for upwards of forty years contributed not a single man to the Navy. Having on either hand an easily accessible coast, inhabited by a people upon whose hospitality the gangs were chary of intruding, and abounding in lurking-places as secure as they were snug, the Mother Firth held on to her sailor sons with a pertinacity and success that excited the envy of the merchant seaman at large and drove impress officers to despair. The towns and villages to the north of the Firth were "full of men." On no part of the north coast, indeed, from St. Abb's Head clear round to Annan Water, was it an easy matter to circumvent the canny Scot who went a-sailing. He had a trick of stopping short of his destination, when homeward bound, that proved as baffling to the gangs as

it was in seeming contradiction to all the traditions of a race who pride themselves on "getting there."¹

In the case of outward-bound ships, the disposition of the two crews was of course reversed. The scratch crew carried the ship down to the stipulated point of exchange, where they vacated her in favour of the actual crew, who had been secretly conveyed to that point by land.² Whichever way the trick was worked, it proved highly effective, for, except from the sea, no gang durst venture near such points of debarkation and departure without strong military support.

There still remained the emergency crew itself. The most decrepit, crippled or youthful were of course out of the question. But the foreigner and our shifty friend the man in lieu were fair game. Entering largely as they did into the make-up of almost every scratch crew, they were pressed without compunction whenever and wherever caught abusing their privileges by playing the emergency man. To keep such persons always and in all circumstances was a point of honour with the Navy Board. It had no other means of squaring accounts with the scratch crew.

The emergency man who plied "on his own" was more difficult to deal with. Keepers of the Eddystone made a "great deal of money" by putting inward-bound ships' crews ashore; but when one of their number, Matthew Dolon by name, was pressed as a punishment for that offence, the Admiralty,

¹ *Ad.* i. 579—Admiral Pringle, Report on Rendezvous, 2 April 1795, and Captains' Letters, *passim*.

² *Ad.* i. 580—Admiral Lord Nelson, Memorandum on the State of the Fleet, 1803.

having the fear of outraged Trade before its eyes, ordered his immediate discharge.¹

The pilot, the fisherman and the longshoreman were notorious offenders in this respect. Whenever they saw a vessel bound in, they were in the habit of putting off to her and of first inciting the crew to escape and then hiring themselves at exorbitant rates to work the vessel into port. On such mischievous interlopers the gangster had no mercy. He took them whenever he could, confident that when their respective cases were stated to the Board, that body would "tumble" to the occasion.

Any attempt at estimating the number of seafaring men who evaded the gangs and the call of the State by means of the devices and subterfuges here roughly sketched into the broad canvas of our picture would prove a task as profitless as it is impossible of accomplishment. One thing only is certain. The number fluctuated greatly from time to time with the activity or inactivity of the gangs. When the press was lax, there arose no question as there existed no need of escape; when it was hot, it was evaded systematically and with a degree of success extremely gratifying to the sailor. Taking the sea-borne coal trade of the port of London alone, it is estimated that in the single month of September 1770, at a time when an exceptionally severe press from protections was in full swing, not less than three thousand collier seamen got ashore between Yarmouth Roads and Foulness Point. As the coal trade was only one of many, and as the stretch of coast concerned comprised but a few miles out of hundreds equally well if not

¹ *Ad. I.* 2732—Capt. Yeo, 25 July 1727.

better adapted to the sailor's furtive habits, the total of escapes must have been little short of enormous. It could not have been otherwise. In this grand battue of the sea it was clearly impossible to round-up and capture every skittish son of Neptune.

On shore, as at sea, the sailor's course, when the gang was on his track, followed the lines of least resistance, only here he became a skulk as well as a fugitive. It was not that he was a less stout-hearted fellow than when at sea. He was merely the victim of a type of land neurosis. Drink and his recent escape from the gang got on his nerves and rendered him singularly liable to panic. The faintest hint of a press was enough to make his hair rise. At the first alarm he scuttled into hiding in the towns, or broke cover like a frightened hare.

The great press of 1755 affords many instances of such panic flights. Abounding in "lurking holes" where a man might lie perdue in comparative safety, King's Lynn nevertheless emptied itself of seamen in a few hours' time, and when the gang hurried to Wells by water, intending to intercept the fugitives there, the "idle fishermen on shore" sounded a fresh alarm and again they stampeded, going off to the eastward in great numbers and burying themselves in the thickly wooded dells and hills of that bit of Devon in Norfolk which lies between Clay-next-the-Sea and Sheringham.¹

A similar exodus occurred at Ipswich. The day the warrants came down, as for many days previous, the ancient borough was full of seamen; but no sooner did it become known that the press was out

¹ *Ad.* 1. 1486—Capt. Baird, 29 March and 21 April 1755.

than they vanished like the dew of the morning. For weeks the face of but one sailor was seen in the town, and he was only ferreted out, with the assistance of a dozen constables, after prolonged and none too legal search.¹

How effectually the sailor could hide when dread of the press had him in its grip is strikingly illustrated by the hot London press of 1740. On that occasion the docks, the riverside slums and dens, the river itself both above and below bridge, were scoured by gangs who left no stratagem untried for unearthing and taking the hidden sailor. When the rigour of the press was past not a seaman, it is said, was to be found at large in London; yet within four-and-twenty hours sixteen thousand emerged from their retreats.²

The secret of such effectual concealment lay in the fact that the nature of his hiding-place mattered little to the sailor so long as it was secure. Accustomed to quarters of the most cramped description on shipboard, he required little room for his stowing. The roughest bed, the worst ventilated hole, the most insanitary surroundings and conditions were all one to him. He could thus hide himself away in places and receptacles from which the average landsman would have turned in fear or disgust. In quarry, clay-pit, cellar or well; in holt, hill or cave; in chimney, hayloft or secret cell behind some old-time oven; in shady alehouse or malodorous slum where a man's life was worth nothing unless he had the smell of tar upon him, and not much then; on isolated farmsteads and eyots, or in towns too remote

¹ *Ad.* 1. 1486—Capt. Brand, 26 Feb. 1755.

² Griffiths, *Impressment Fully Considered*.

or too hostile for the gangster to penetrate—some-where, somehow and of some sort the sailor found his lurking-place, and in it, by good providence, lay safe and snug throughout the hottest press.

Many of the seamen employed in the Newfoundland trade of Poole, gaining the shore at Chapman's Pool or Lulworth, whiled away their stolen leisure either in the clay-pits of the Isle of Purbeck, where they defied intrusion by posting armed sentries at every point of access to their stronghold, or—their favourite haunt—on Portland Island, which the number and ill-repute of the labourers employed in its stone quarries rendered well-nigh impregnable. To search for, let alone to take the seamen frequenting that natural fortress—who of course “squared” the hard-bitten quarrymen—was more than any gang durst undertake unless, as was seldom the case, it consisted of some “very superior force.”¹

With the solitary exception of Falmouth town, the Cornish coast was merely another Portland Neck enormously extended. From Rame Head to the Lizard and Land's End, and in a minor sense from Land's End away to Bude Haven in the far nor'-east, the entire littoral of this remote part of the kingdom was forbidden ground whereon no gangster's life was worth a moment's purchase. The two hundred seines and twice two hundred drift-boats belonging to that coast employed at least six thousand fishermen, and of these the greater part, as soon as the fishing season was at an end, either turned “tinnerns” and went into the mines, where they were unassail-

¹ *Ad.* 1. 581—Admiral Berkeley, Report on Rendezvous, 5 Aug. 1805.

able,¹ or betook themselves to their strongholds at Newquay, St. Ives, Newland, Mousehole, Coversack, Polpero, Cawsand and other places where, in common with smugglers, deserters from the king's ships at Hamoaze, and an endless succession of fugitive merchant seamen, they were as safe from intrusion or capture as they would have been on the coast of Labrador. It was impossible either to hunt them down or to take them on a coast so "completely perforated." A thousand "stout, able young fellows" could have been drawn from this source without being missed; but the gangs fought shy of the task, and only when they carried vessels in distress into Falmouth were the redoubtable sons of the coves ever molested.²

On the Bristol Channel side Lundy Island offered unrivalled facilities for evasion, and many were the crews marooned there by far-sighted skippers who calculated on thus securing them against their return from Bristol, outward bound. The gangs as a rule gave this little Heligoland a wide berth, and when carried thither against their will they had a disconcerting habit of running away with the press-boat, and of thus marooning their commanding officer, that contributed not a little to the immunity the island enjoyed.³

The sailor's objection to Lundy was as strong as the gangster's. From his point of view it was no ideal place to hide in, and the effect upon him of

¹ *Ad.* i. 581—Admiral Berkeley, Report on Rendezvous, 28 Sept. 1805.

² *Ad.* i. 579—Admiral M'Bride, 9 March 1795. *Ad.* i. 578—Petition of the Inhabitants of the Village of Coversack, 31 Jan. 1778.

³ *Ad.* i. 1439—Capt. Aylmer, 22 Dec. 1743.

enforced sojourn there was to make him sulky and mutinous. Rather the shore with all its dangers than an island that produced neither tobacco, rum, nor women! He therefore preferred sticking to his ship, even though he thereby ran the risk of impressment, until she arrived the length of the Holmes.

These islands are two in number, Steep Holme and Flat Holme, and so closely can vessels approach the latter, given favourable weather conditions, that a stone may be cast on shore from the deck. The business of landing and embarking was consequently easy, and though the islands themselves were as barren as Lundy of the three commodities the sailor loved, he was nevertheless content to terminate his voyage there for the following reasons. Under the lee of one or other of the islands there was generally to be found a boat-load of men who were willing, for a suitable return in coin of the realm, to work the ship into King Road, the anchorage of the port of Bristol. The sailor was thus left free to gain the shore in the neighbourhood of Uphill, Weston, or Clevedon Bay, whence it was an easy tramp, not to Bristol, of which he steered clear because of its gangs, but to Bath, or, did he prefer a place nearer at hand, to the little town of Pill, near Avon-mouth.

A favourite haunt of seafaring men, fishermen, pilots and pilots' assistants, with a liberal sprinkling of that class of female known in sailor lingo as "brutes," this lively little town was a place after Jack's own heart. The gangsmen gave it a wide berth. It offered an abundance of material for him to work upon, but that material was a trifle too rough even for his infastidious taste. The majority of the

permanent indwellers of Pill, as well as the casual ones, not only protected themselves from the press, when such a course was necessary, by a ready use of the fist and the club, but, when this means of exemption failed them, pleaded the special nature of their calling with great plausibility and success. They were "pilots' assistants," and as such they enjoyed for many years the unqualified indulgence of the naval authorities. The appellation they bore was nevertheless purely euphemistic. As a matter of fact they were sailors' assistants who, under cover of an ostensible vocation, made it their real business, at the instigation and expense of Bristol shipowners, to save crews harmless from the gangs by boarding ships at the Holmes and working them from thence into the roadstead or to the quays. They are said to have been "very fine young men," and many a longing look did the impress officers at Bristol cast their way whilst struggling to swell their monthly returns. So essentially necessary to the trade of the place were they considered to be, however, that they were allowed to checkmate the gangs, practically without molestation or hindrance, till about the beginning of the last century, when the Admiralty, suddenly awaking to the unpatriotic nature of a practice that so effectually deprived the Navy of its due, caused them to be served with a notice to the effect that "for the future all who navigated ships from the Holmes should be pressed as belonging to those ships." At this threat the Pill men jeered. Relying on the length of pilotage water between King Road and Bristol, they took a leaf from the sailor's log and ran before the press-boats could reach the ships in

which they were temporarily employed. For four years this state of things continued. Then there was struck at the practice a blow which not even the Admiralty had foreseen. Tow-paths were constructed along the river-bank, and the pilots' assistants, ousted by horses, fell an easy prey to the gangs.¹

Bath had no gang, and was in consequence much frequented by sailors of the better class. In 1803—taking that as a normal year—the number within its limits was estimated at three hundred—enough to man a ship-of-the-line. The fact being duly reported to the Admiralty, a lieutenant and gang were ordered over from Bristol to do some pressing. The civic authorities—mayor, magistrates, constables and watchmen—fired with sudden zeal for the service, all came forward “in the most handsome manner” with offers of countenance and support. In the purlieus of the town, however, the advent of the gang created panic. The seamen went into prompt hiding, the mob turned out in force, angry and threatening, resolved that no gang should violate the sanctuary of a cathedral city. Seeing how the wind set, the mayor and magistrates, having begun by backing the warrant, continued backing until they backed out of the affair altogether. The zealous watchmen could not be found, the eager constables ran away. Dismayed by these untimely defections, the lieutenant hurriedly resolved “to drop the business.” So the gang marched back to Bristol empty-handed, followed by the hearty execrations of the rabble and the heartier good wishes of the mayor, who assured them that as soon as he should be able

¹ *Ad. I.* 581—Admiral Berkeley, Report on Rendezvous, 14 April 1805.

to clap the skulking seamen in jail "on suspicion of various misdemeanours," he would send for them again.¹ We do not learn that he ever did.

To Bristol no unprotected sailor ever repaired of his own free will, for early in the century of pressing the chickens of the most notorious kidnapping city in England began to come home to roost. The mantle of the Bristol mayor whom Jeffreys tried for a "kidnapping knave" fell upon a succession of regulating captains whose doings put their civic prototype to open shame, and more petitions and protests against the lawlessness of the gangs emanated from Bristol than from any other city in the kingdom.

The trowmen who navigated the Severn and the Wye, belonging as they did mainly to extra-parochial spots in the Forest of Dean, were exempt from the Militia ballot and the Army of Reserve. On the ground that they came under the protection of inland navigation, they likewise considered themselves exempt from the sea service, but this contention the Court of Exchequer in 1798 completely upset by deciding that the "passage of the River Severn between Gloucester and Bristol is open sea." A press-gang was immediately let loose upon the numerous tribe frequenting it, whereupon the whole body of newly created sailors deserted their trows and fled to the Forest, where they remained in hiding till the disappointed gang sought other and more fruitful fields.²

Within Chester gates the sailor for many years

¹ *Ad. I.* 1528—Capt. Barker, 3 and 11 July 1803.

² *Ad. I.* 581—Admiral Berkeley, Report on Rendezvous, 14 April 1805.

slept as securely as upon the high seas. No householder would admit the gangsmen beneath his roof; and when at length they succeeded in gaining a foothold within the city, all who were liable to the press immediately deserted it—"as they do every town where there is a gang"—and went "to reside at Parkgate." Parkgate in this way became a resort of seafaring men without parallel in the kingdom—a "nest" whose hornet bands were long, and with good reason, notorious for their ferocity and aggressiveness.¹ An attempt to establish a rendezvous here in 1804 proved a failure. The seamen fled, no "business" could be done, and officer and gang were soon withdrawn.

In comparison with the seething Deeside hamlet, Liverpool was tameness itself. Now and then, as in 1745, the sailor element rose in arms, demanding who was master; but as a rule it suffered the gang, if not gladly, at least with exemplary patience. Homing seamen who desired to evade the press in that city—and they were many—fled ashore from their ships at Highlake, a spot so well adapted to their purpose that it required "strict care to catch them." From Highlake they made their way to Parkgate, swelling still further the sailor population of that far-famed nest of skulkers.

Cork was a minor Parkgate. A graphic account of the conditions obtaining in that city has been left to us by Capt. Bennett, of H.M.S. *Lennox*, who did port duty there from May 1779 till March 1783. "Many hundreds of the best Seamen in this Province," he tells us, "resort in Bodys in Country Villages round about here, where they are maintained

¹ *Ad. I.* 1446—Capt. Ayscough, 17 Nov. 1780.

by the Crimps, who dispose of them to Bristol, Liverpool and other Privateers, who appoint what part of the Coast to take them on Board. They go in Bodys, even in the Town of Cork, and bid defiance to the Press-gangs, and resort in houses armed, and laugh at both civil and military Power. This they did at Kinsale, where they threatened to pull the Jail down in a garrison'd Town."¹ These tactics rendered the costly press-gangs all but useless. A hot press at Cork, in 1796, yielded only sixteen men fit for the service.

Space fails us to tell of how, owing to a three days' delay in the London post that brought the warrants to Newhaven in the spring of '78, the "alarm of soon pressing" spread like wildfire along that coast and drove every vessel to sea; of how "three or four hundred young fellows" belonging to Great Yarmouth and Gorleston, who had no families and could well have been spared without hindrance to the seafaring business of those towns, thought otherwise and took a little trip of "thirty or forty miles in the country to hide from the service"; or of how Capt. Routh, of the rendezvous at Leeds, happened upon a great concourse of skulkers at Castleford, whither they had been drawn by reasons of safety and the alleged fact that

"Castleford woman must needs be fair,
Because they wash both in Calder and Aire,"

and after two unsuccessful attempts at surprise, at length took them with the aid of the military. These were everyday incidents which were accepted as matters of course and surprised nobody. Neverthe-

¹ *Ad. I.* 1502—Capt. Bennett, 12 and 26 April 1782.

less the vagaries of the wayward children of the State, who chose to run away and hide instead of remaining to play the game, cost the naval authorities many an anxious moment. *They* had to face both evasion and invasion, and the prevalence of the one did not help to repel the other.

His country's fear of invasion by the French afforded the seafaring man the chance of the century. Pitt's Quota Bill put good money in his pocket at the expense of his liberty, but in Admiral Sir Home Popham's great scheme for the defence of the coasts against Boney and his flat-bottomed boats he scented something far more to his advantage and taste.

From the day in 1796 when Capt. Moriarty, press-gang-officer at Cork, reported the arrival of the long-expected Brest fleet off the Irish coast,¹ the question how best to defend from sudden attack so enormously extended and highly vulnerable a sea-board as that of the United Kingdom, became one of feverish moment. At least a hundred different projects for compassing that desirable end at one time or another claimed the attention of the Navy Board.² One of these was decidedly ingenious. It aimed at destroying the French flotilla by means of logs of wood bored hollow and charged with gunpowder and ball. These were to be launched against the invaders somewhat after the manner of the modern torpedo, of which they were, in fact, the primitive type and original.³

¹ *Ad. I.* 1621—Capt. Crosby, 30 Dec. 1796.

² *Ad. I.* 581—Admiral Knowles, 25 Jan. 1805.

³ *Ad. I.* 580—Rear-Admiral Young, 14 Aug. 1803, and secret enclosure, as in the Appendix. The Admiral's "machine," as he termed it, though embodying the true torpedo idea of an explosive device to be

Meantime, however, the Admiralty had adopted another plan—Admiral Popham, already famous for his improved code of signals, its originator. On paper it possessed the merits of all Haldanic substitutes for the real thing. It was patriotic, cheap, simple as kissing your hand. All you had to do was to take the fisherman, the longshoreman and other stalwarts who lived “one foot in sea and one on shore,” enroll them in corps under the command (as distinguished from the control) of naval officers, and practise them (on Sundays, since it was a work of strict necessity) in the use of the pike and the cannon, and, hey presto! the country was as safe from invasion as if the meddlesome French had never been. The expense would be trivial. Granting that the French did not take alarm and incontinently drop their hostile designs upon the tight little island, there would be a small outlay for pay, a trifle of a shilling a day on exercise days, but nothing more—except for martello towers. The boats it was proposed to enroll and arm would cost nothing. Their patriotic owners were to provide them free of charge.

Such was the Popham scheme on paper. On a working basis it proved quite another thing. The pikes provided were old ship-pikes, rotten and worthless. The only occasion on which they appear to have served any good purpose was when, at Gerrans and St. Mawes, the Fencibles joined the mob and

propelled against an enemy's ship, was not designed to be so propelled on its own buoyancy, but by means of a fishing-boat, in which it lay concealed. Had his inventive genius taken a bolder flight and given us a more finished product in place of this crudity, the Whitehead torpedo would have been anticipated, in something more than mere principle, by upwards of half a century.

terrified the farmers, who were ignorant of the actual condition of the pikes, into selling their corn at something less than famine prices.¹ Guns hoary with age, requisitioned from country churchyards and village greens where they had rusted, some of them, ever since the days of Drake and Raleigh, were dragged forth and proudly grouped as "parks of artillery."² Signal stations could not be seen one from the other, or, if visible, perpetrated signals no one could read. The armed smacks were equally unreliable. In Ireland they could not be "trusted out of sight with a gun."³ In England they left the guns behind them. The weight, the patriotic owners discovered, seriously hampered the carrying capacity and seaworthiness of their boats; so to abate the nuisance they hove the guns overboard on to the beach, where they were speedily buried in sand or shingle, while the appliances were carried off by those who had other uses for them than their country's defence. The vessels thus armed, moreover, were always at sea, the men never at home. When it was desired to practise them in the raising of the sluice-gates which, in the event of invasion, were to convert Romney Marsh into an inland sea, no efforts availed to get together sufficient men for the purpose. Immune from the press by reason of their newly created status of Sea-Fencibles, they were all elsewhere, following their time-honoured vocations of fishing and smuggling with industry and gladness of heart. As a means of repelling invasion the Popham

¹ *Ad. I.* 579—Capt. Spry, 14 April 1801.

² *Ad. I.* 1513—Capt. Bradley, 21 Aug. 1796.

³ *Ad. I.* 1529—Capt. Bowen, 12 Oct. 1803.

scheme was farcical and worthless ; as a means of evading the press it was the finest thing ever invented.¹ The only benefits the country ever drew from it, apart from this, were two. It provided the Admiralty with an incomparable register of seafaring men, and some modern artists with secluded summer retreats.

It goes without saying that a document of such vital consequence to the seafaring man as an Admiralty protection did not escape the attention of those who, from various motives, sought to aid and abet the sailor in his evasion of the press. Protections were freely lent and exchanged, bought and sold, "coaxed," concocted and stolen. Skilful predecessors of Jim the Penman imitated to the life the signatures of Pembroke and Sandwich, Lord High Admirals, and of the lesser fry who put the official hand to those magic papers. "Great abuses" were "committed that way." Bogus protections could be obtained at Sunderland for 8s. 6d., Stephenson and Collins, the disreputable schoolmasters who made a business of faking them, coining money by the "infamous practice." In London "one Broucher, living in St. Michael's Lane," supplied them to all comers at £3 apiece. Even the Navy Office was not above suspicion in this respect, for in '98 a clerk there, whose name does not transpire, was accused of adding to his income by the sale of bogus protections at a guinea a head.²

¹ *Ad.* I. 581—Admiral Berkeley, Reports on Sea-Fencibles, 1805 ; Admiral Lord Keith, Sentiments upon the Sea-Fencible System, 7 Jan. 1805.

² *Ad.* I. 2740—Lieut. Abbs, 5 Oct. 1798.

American protections were the Admiralty's pet bugbear. For many years after the successful issue of the War of Independence a bitter animosity characterised the attitude of the British naval officer towards the American sailor. Whenever he could be laid hold of he was pressed, and no matter what documents he produced in evidence of his American birth and citizenship, those documents were almost invariably pronounced false and fraudulent.

There were weighty reasons, however, for refusing to accept the claim of the alleged American sailor at its face value. No class of protection was so generally forged, so extensively bought and sold, as the American. Practically every British seaman who made the run to an American port took the precaution, during his sojourn in that land of liberty, to provide himself with spurious papers against his return to England, where he hoped, by means of them, to checkmate the gang. The process of obtaining such papers was simplicity itself. All the sailor had to do, at, say, New York, was to apply himself to one Riley, whose other name was Paddy. The sum of three dollars having changed hands, Riley and his client betook themselves to the retreat of some shady Notary Public, where the Irishman made ready oath that the British seaman was as much American born as himself. The business was now as good as done, for on the strength of this lying affidavit any Collector of Customs on the Atlantic coast would for a trifling fee grant the sailor a certificate of citizenship. Riley created American citizens in this way at the rate, it is said, of a dozen a day,¹

¹ *Ad.* I. 1523—Deposition of Zacharias Pasco, 20 Jan. 1800.

and as he was only one of many plying the same lucrative trade, the effect of such wholesale creations upon the impress service in England, had they been allowed to pass unchallenged, may be readily conceived.

The fraud, worse luck for the service, was by no means confined to America. Almost every home seaport had its recognised purveyor of "false American passes." At Liverpool a former clerk to the Collector of Customs for Pembroke, Pillsbury by name, grew rich on them, whilst at Greenock, Shields and other north-country shipping centres they were for many years readily procurable of one Walter Gilly and his confederates, whose transactions in this kind of paper drove the Navy Board to desperation. They accordingly instructed Capt. Brown, gang-officer at Greenock, to take Gilly at all hazards, but the fabricator of passes fled the town ere the gang could be put on his track.¹

Considering that every naval officer, from the Lord High Admiral downwards, had these facts and circumstances at his fingers' ends, it is hardly surprising that protections having, or purporting to have, an American origin, should have been viewed with profound distrust—distrust too often justified, and more than justified, by the very nature of the documents themselves. Thus a gentleman of colour, Cato Martin by name, when taken out of the *Dolly* West-Indiaman at Bristol, had the assurance to produce a white man's pass certifying his eyes, which were undeniably yellow, to be a soft sky-blue, and his hair, which was hopelessly black and woolly, to be of that well-known hue most commonly associated with

Ad. I. 1549—Capt. Brown, 22 Aug. 1809.

hair grown north of the Tweed. It was reserved, however, for an able seaman bearing the distinguished name of Oliver Cromwell to break all known records in this respect. When pressed, he unblushingly produced a pass dated in America the 29th of May and viséd by the American Consul in London on the 6th of June immediately following, thus conferring on its bearer the unique distinction of having crossed the Atlantic in eight days at a time when the voyage occupied honest men nearly as many weeks. To press such frauds was a public benefit. On the other hand, one confesses to a certain sympathy with the American sailor who was pressed because he "spoke English very well."¹

Believing in the simplicity of his heart that others were as gullible as himself, the fugitive sailor sought habitually to hide his identity beneath some temporary disguise of greater or less transparency. That of farm labourer was perhaps his favourite choice. The number of seamen so disguised, and employed on farms within ten miles of the coast between Hull and Whitby prior to the sailing of the Greenland and Baltic ships in 1803, was estimated at more than a thousand able-bodied men.² Seamen using the Newfoundland trade of Dartmouth were "half-farmer, half-sailor." When the call of the sea no longer lured them, they returned to the land in an agricultural sense, resorting in hundreds to the farmsteads in the Southams, where they were far out of reach of the gangs.³

¹ *Ad.* i. 2734—Capt. Yorke, 8 March 1798.

² *Ad.* i. 580—Admiral Phillip, Report on Rendezvous, 25 April 1804.

³ *Ad.* i. 579—Admiral M'Bride, Report on Rendezvous, 28 Feb. 1795.

CHAPTER VII

WHAT THE GANG DID ASHORE

IN his endeavours to escape the gang the sailor resembled nothing so much as that hopelessly impotent fugitive the flying-fish. For both the sea swarmed with enemies bent on catching them. Both sought to evade those enemies by flight, and both, their ineffectual flight ended, returned to the sea again whether they would or not. It was their fate, a deep-sea kismet as unavoidable as death.

The ultimate destination of the sailor who by strategy or accident succeeded in eluding the triple line of sea-gangs so placed as to head him off from the coast, was thus never in doubt. His longest flights were those he made on land, for here the broad horizon that stood the gangs in such good stead at sea was measurably narrower, while hiding-places abounded and were never far to seek. All the same, in spite of these adventitious aids to self-effacement, the predestined end of the seafaring man sooner or later overtook him. The gang met him at the turning of the ways and wiped him off the face of the land. In the expressive words of a naval officer who knew the conditions thoroughly well, the sailor's chances of obtaining a good run for his money "were not worth a chaw of tobacco."

For this inevitable finish to all the sailor's attempts at flight on shore there existed in the main two reasons. The first of these lay in the sailor himself, making of him an unconscious aider and abettor in his own capture. Just as love and a cough cannot be hid, so there was no disguising the fact that the sailor was a sailor. He was marked by characteristics that infallibly betrayed him. His bandy legs and rolling gait suggested irresistibly the way of a ship at sea, and no "soaking" in alehouse or tavern could eliminate the salt from the peculiar oaths that were as natural to him as the breath of life. Assume what disguise he would, he fell under suspicion at sight, and he had only to open his mouth to turn that suspicion into certainty. It needed no Sherlock Holmes of a gangster to divine what he was or whence he came.

The second reason why the sailor could never long escape the gangs was because the gangs were numerically too many for him. It was no question of a chance gang here and there. The country swarmed with them.

Take the coast. Here every seaport of any pretensions in the way of trade, together with every spot between such ports known to be favoured or habitually used by the homing sailor as a landing-place, with certain exceptions already noted, either had its own particular gang or was closely watched by some gang stationed within easy access of the spot. In this way the whole island was ringed in by gangs on shore, just as it was similarly ringed in by other gangs afloat.

"If their Lordships would give me authority to

press here," says Lieut. Oakley, writing to the Sea Lords from Deal in 1743, "I could frequently pick up good seamen ashoar. I mean seamen *who by some means escape being prest by the men of war and tenders.*"

In this modest request the lieutenant states the whole case for the land-gang, at once demonstrating its utility and defining its functions. Unconsciously he does more. He echoes a cry that incessantly assailed the ears of Admiralty: "The sailor has escaped! Send us warrants and give us gangs, and we will catch him yet."

It was this call, the call of the fleet, that dominated the situation and forced order out of chaos. The men must be "rose," and only method could do it. The demand was a heavy one to make upon the most unsystematic system ever known, yet it survived the ordeal. The coast was mapped out, warrants were dispatched to this point and that, rendezvous were opened, gangs formed. No effort or outlay was spared to take the sailor the moment he got ashore, or very soon after.

In this systematic setting of land-traps that vast head-centre of the nation's overseas trade, the metropolis, naturally had first place. The streets, and especially the waterside streets, were infested with gangs. At times it was unsafe for any able-bodied man to venture abroad unless he had on him an undeniable protection or wore a dress that unmistakeably proclaimed the gentleman. The general rendezvous was on Tower Hill; but as ships completing their complement nearly always sent a gang or two to London, minor rendezvous abounded. St. Katherine's by the Tower was specially favoured by

them. The "Rotterdam Arms" and the "Two Dutch Skippers," well-known taverns within that precinct, were seldom without the bit of bunting that proclaimed the headquarters of the gang. At Westminster the "White Swan" in King's Street usually bore a similar decoration, as did also the "Ship" in Holborn.

A characteristic case of pressing by a gang using the last-named house occurred in 1706. Ransacking the town in quest of pressable subjects of Her Majesty, they came one day to the "Cock and Rummer" in Bow Street, where a big dinner was in progress. Here nothing would suit their tooth but mine host's apprentice, and as ill-luck would have it the apprentice was cook to the establishment and responsible for the dinner. Him they nevertheless seized and would have hurried away in spite of his master's supplications, protests and offers of free drinks, had it not been for the fact that a mob collected and forcibly prevented them. Other gangs hurrying to the assistance of their hard-pressed comrades—to the number, it is said, of sixty men—a free fight ensued, in the course of which a burly constable, armed with a formidable longstaff, was singled out by the original gang, doubtless on account of the prominent part he took in the fray, as a fitting substitute for the apprentice. By dint of beating the poor fellow till he was past resistance they at length got him to the "Ship," where they were in the very act of bundling him into a coach, with the intention of carrying him to the waterside below bridge, and of their putting him on board the press-smack, when in the general confusion he somehow effected

his escape.¹ Such incidents were common enough not only at that time but long after.

At Gravesend sailors came ashore in such numbers from East India and other ships as to keep a brace of gangs busy. Another found enough to do at Broadstairs, whence a large number of vessels sailed in the Iceland cod fishery and similar industries. Faversham was a port and had its gang, and from Margate right away to Portsmouth, and from Portsmouth to Plymouth, nearly every town of any size that offered ready hiding to the fugitive sailor from the Channel was similarly favoured. Brighton formed a notable exception, and this circumstance gave rise to an episode about which we shall have more to say presently.

To record in these pages the *local* of all the gangs that were stationed in this manner upon the seaboard of the kingdom would be as undesirable as it is foreign to the scope of this chapter. Enough to repeat that the land, always the sailor's objective in eluding the triple cordon of sea-borne gangs, was ringed in and surrounded by a circle of land-gangs in every respect identical with that described as hedging the southern coast, and in its continuity almost as unbroken as the shore itself. Both sea-gangs and coast-gangs were amphibious, using either land or sea at pleasure.

Inland the conditions were the same, yet materially different. What was on the coast an encircling line assumed here the form of a vast net, to which the principal towns, the great cross-roads and the arterial bridges of the country stood in the relation of reticular

¹ "A Horrible Relation," *Review*, 17 March 1705-6.

knots, while the constant "ranging" of the gangs, now in this direction, now in that, supplied the connecting filaments or threads. The gangs composing this great inland net were not amphibious. Their most desperate aquatic ventures were confined to rivers and canals. Ability to do their twenty miles a day on foot counted for more with them than a knowledge of how to handle an oar or distinguish the "cheeks" of a gaff from its "jaw."

Just as the sea-gangs in their raids upon the land were the Danes and "creekmen" of their time, so the land-gangsmen were the true highwaymen of the century that begot him. He kept every strategic point of every main thoroughfare, held all the bridges, watched all the ferries, haunted all the fairs. No place where likely men were to be found escaped his calculating eye.

He was an inveterate early riser, and sailors sauntering to the fair for want of better employment ran grave risks. In this way a large number were taken on the road to Croydon fair one morning in September 1743. For actual pressing the fair itself was unsafe because of the great concourse of people; but it formed one of the best possible hunting-grounds and was kept under close observation for that reason. Here the gangsmen marked his victim, whose steps he dogged into the country when his business was done or his pleasure ended, never for a moment losing sight of him until he walked into the trap all ready set in some wayside spinny or beneath some sheltering bridge.

Bridges were the inland gangsmen's favourite haunt. They not only afforded ready concealment,

they had to be crossed. Thus Lodden Bridge, near Reading, accounted one of the "likeliest places in the country for straggling seamen," was seldom without its gang. Nor was the great bridge at Gloucester, since, as the first bridge over the Severn, it drew to itself all the highroads and their users from Wales and the north. To sailors making for the south coast from those parts it was a point of approach as dangerous as it was unavoidable. Great numbers were taken here in consequence.¹

So of ferries. The passage boats at Queensferry on the Firth of Forth, watched by gangs from Inverkeithing, yielded almost as many men in the course of a year as the costly rendezvous at Leith. Greenock ferries proved scarcely less productive. But there was here an exception. The ferry between Glenfinart and Greenock plied only twice a week, and as both occasions coincided with market-days the boat was invariably crowded with women. Only once did it yield a man. Peter Weir, the hand in charge, one day overset the boat, drowning every soul on board except himself. Thereupon the gang pressed him, arguing that one who used the sea so effectively could not fail to make a valuable addition to the fleet.

Inland towns traversed by the great highroads leading from north to south, or from east to west, were much frequented by the gangs. Amongst these Stourbridge perhaps ranked first. Situated midway between the great ports of Liverpool and Bristol, it easily and effectually commanded Birmingham,

¹ *Ad.* 1. 581—Admiral Berkeley, Report on Rendezvous, 14 April 1805.

Wolverhampton, Bridgnorth, Bewdley, Kidderminster and other populous towns, while it was too small to afford secure hiding within itself. The gangs operating from Stourbridge brought in an endless procession of ragged and travel-stained seamen.¹

From ports on the Bristol Channel to ports on the English Channel, and the reverse, many seamen crossed the country by stage-coach or wagon, and to intercept them gangs were stationed at Okehamp-ton, Liskeard and Exeter. Taunton and Salisbury also, as "great thoroughfares to and from the west," had each its gang, and a sufficient number of sailors escaped the press at the latter place to justify the presence of another at Romsey. Andover had a gang as early as 1756, on the recommendation of no less a man than Rodney.

Shore gangs were of necessity ambulatory. To sit down before the rendezvous pipe in hand, and expect the evasive sailor to come of his own accord and beg the favour of being pressed, would have been a futile waste of time and tobacco. The very essence of the gangman's duty lay in the leg-work he did. To that end he ate the king's victuals and wore the king's shoe-leather. Consequently he was early afoot and late to bed. Ten miles out and ten home made up his daily constitutional, and if he saw fit to exceed that distance he did not incur his captain's displeasure. The gang at Reading, a strategic point of great importance on the Bath and Bristol road, traversed all the country round about within a radius of twenty miles—double the regulation distance. That at

¹ *Ad. I.* 1500—Letters of Capt. Beecher, 1780.

King's Lynn, another centre of unmeasured possibilities, trudged as far afield as Boston, Ely, Peterborough and Wells-on-Sea. And the Isle of Wight gang, stationed at Cowes or Ryde, now and then co-operated with a gang from Portsmouth or Gosport and ranged the whole length and breadth of the island, which was a noted nest of deserters and skulkers. "Range," by the way, was a word much favoured by the officers who led such expeditions. Its use is happy. It suggests the object well in view, the nicely calculated distance, the steady aim that seldom missed its mark. The gang that "ranged" rarely returned empty-handed.

On these excursions the favourite resting-place was some secluded nook overlooking the point of crossing of two or more highroads; the favourite place of refreshment, some busy wayside alehouse. Both were good to rest or refresh in, for at both the chances of effecting a capture were far more numerous than on the open road.

The object of the gang in taking the road was not, however, so much what could be picked up by chance in the course of a day's march, as the execution of some preconcerted design upon a particular person or place. This brings us to the methods of pressing commonly adopted, which may be roughly summarised under the three heads of surprise, violence and the hunt. Frequently all three were combined; but as in the case of gangs operating on the waters of rivers or harbours, the essential element in all pre-arranged raids, attacks and predatory expeditions was the first-named element, surprise. In this respect the gangsmen were genuine

“Peep-o’-Day Boys.” The siege of Brighton is a notable case in point.

The inhabitants of Brighton, better known in the days of the press-gang as Brighthelmstone, consisted largely of fisher-folk in respect to whom the Admiralty had been guilty of one of its rare oversights. For generations no call was made upon them to serve the king at sea. This accidental immunity in course of time came to be regarded by the Brighton fisherman as his birthright, and the misconception bred consequences. For one thing, it made him intolerably saucy. He boasted that no impress officer had power to take him, and he backed up the boast by openly insulting, and on more than one occasion violently assaulting the king’s uniform. With all this he was a hardy, long-lived, lusty fellow, and as his numbers were never thinned by that active corrector of an excessive birth-rate, the press-gang, he speedily overstocked the town. An energetic worker while his two great harvests of herring and mackerel held out, he was at other times indolent, lazy and careless of the fact that his numerous progeny burdened the rates.¹ These unpleasing circumstances having been duly reported to the Admiralty, their Lordships decided that what the Brighton fisherman required to correct his lax principles and stiffen his backbone was a good hot press. They accordingly issued orders for an early raid to be made upon that promising nursery of man-o’-war’s-men.

The orders, which were of course secret, bore date the 3rd of July 1779, and were directed to

¹ *Ad. I.* 580—Admiral Berkeley, Report on Rendezvous, 31 Dec. 1804.

Capt. Alms, who, as regulating officer at Shoreham, was likewise in charge of the gang at Newhaven under Lieut. Bradley, and of the gang at Littlehampton under Lieut. Breedon. At Shoreham there was also a tender, manned by an able crew. With these three gangs and the tender's crew at his back, Alms determined to lay siege to Brighton and teach the fishermen there a lesson they should not soon forget. But first, in order to render the success of the project doubly sure, he enlisted the aid of Major-General Sloper, Commandant at Lewes, who readily consented to lend a company of soldiers to assist in the execution of the design.

These preparations were some little time in the making, and it was not until the Thursday immediately preceding the 24th of July that all was in readiness. On the night of that day, by preconcerted arrangement, the allied forces took the road—for the Littlehampton gang, a matter of some twenty miles—and at the first flush of dawn united on the outskirts of the sleeping town, where the soldiers were without loss of time so disposed as to cut off every avenue of escape. This done, the gangs split up and by devious ways, but with all expedition, concentrated their strength upon the quay, expecting to find there a large number of men making ready for the day's fishing. To their intense chagrin the quay was deserted. The night had been a tempestuous one, with heavy rain, and though the unfortunate gangsmen were soaked to the skin, the fishermen all lay dry in bed. Hearing the wind and rain, not a man turned out.

By this time the few people who were abroad on

necessary occasions had raised the alarm, and on every hand were heard loud cries of "Press-gang!" and the hurried barricading of doors. For ten hours "every man kept himself locked up and bolted." For ten hours Alms waited in vain upon the local Justice of the Peace for power to break and enter the fishermen's cottages. His repeated requests being refused, he was at length "under the necessity of quitting the town with only one man." So ended the siege of Brighton; but Bradley, on his way back to Newhaven, fell in with a gang of smugglers, of whom he pressed five. Brighton did not soon forget the terrors of that rain-swept morning. For many a long day her people were "very shy, and cautious of appearing in public." The salutary effects of the raid, however, did not extend to the fishermen it was intended to benefit. They became more insolent than ever, and a few years later marked their resentment of the attempt to press them by administering a sound thrashing to Mr. Midshipman Sealy, of the Shoreham rendezvous, whom they one day caught unawares.¹

The surprise tactics of the gang of course varied according to circumstances, and the form they took was sometimes highly ingenious. A not uncommon stratagem was the impersonation of a recruiting party beating up for volunteers. With cockades in their hats, drums rolling and fifes shrilling, the gangsmen, who of course had their arms concealed, marched ostentatiously through the high-street of some sizable country town and so into the market-place. Since nobody had anything to fear from a harmless recruiting party, people turned out in strength to see the

¹ *Ad.* I. 1445-46—Letters of Capt. Alms.

sight and listen to the music. When they had in this way drawn as many as they could into the open, the gangsmen suddenly threw off their disguise and seized every pressable person they could lay hands on. Market-day was ill-adapted to these tactics. It brought too big a crowd together.

A similar ruse was once practised with great success upon the inhabitants of Portsmouth by Capt. Bowen of the *Dreadnought*, in connection with a general press which the Admiralty had secretly ordered to be made in and about that town. Dockyard towns were not as a rule considered good pressing-grounds because of the drain of men set up by the ships of war fitting out there; but Bowen had certainly no reason to subscribe to that opinion. Late on the night of the 8th of March 1803, he landed a company of marines at Gosport for the purpose, as it was given out, of suppressing a mutiny at Fort Monckton. The news spread rapidly, drawing crowds of people from their homes in anticipation of an exciting scrimmage. This gave Bowen the opportunity he counted upon. When the throngs had crossed Haslar Bridge he posted marines at the bridge-end, and as the disappointed people came pouring back the "jollies" pressed every man in the crowd. Five hundred are said to have been taken on this occasion, but as the nature of the service forbade discrimination at the moment of pressing, nearly one-half were next day discharged as unfit or exempt.¹

Sometimes, though not often, it was the gang that was surprised. All hands would perhaps be snug in bed after a long and trying day, when suddenly a

¹ *Ad. R.* 1. 1057—Admiral Milbanke, 9 March 1803.

thunderous knocking at the rendezvous door, and stentorian cries of: "Turn out! turn out there!" coupled with epithets here unproducible, would bring every man of them into the street in the turn of a handspike, half-dressed but fully armed and awake to the fact that a party of belated seamen was coming down the road. The sailors were perhaps more road-weary than the gangsmen, and provided none of them succeeded in slipping away in the darkness, or made a successful resistance, in half-an-hour's time or less the whole party would be safe under lock and key, cursing luck for a scurvy trickster in delivering them over to the gang.

The sailor's well-known partiality for drink was constantly turned to account by the astute gangster. If a sailor himself, he laid aside his hanger or cudgel and played the game of "What ho! shipmate" at the cost of a can or two of flip, gently guiding his boon companion to the rendezvous when he had got him sufficiently corned. Failing these tactics, he adopted others equally effective. At Liverpool, where the seafaring element was always a large one, it was a common practice for the gangs to lie low for a time, thus inducing the sailor to believe himself safe from molestation. He immediately indulged in a desperate drinking bout and so put himself entirely in their power. Whether rolling about the town "very much in liquor," or "snugly moored in Sot's Bay," he was an easy victim.

Another ineradicable weakness that often landed the sailor in the press-room was his propensity to indulge in "swank." Two jolly tars, who were fully protected and consequently believed themselves

immune from the press, once bought a four-wheeled post-chaise and hired a painter in Long Acre to ornament it with anchors, masts, cannon and a variety of other objects emblematic of the sea. In this ornate vehicle they set out, behind six horses, with the intention of posting down to Alnwick, where their sweethearts lived. So impatient were they to get over the road that they could not be prevailed upon, at any of the numerous inns where they pulled up for refreshment, to stop long enough to have the wheels properly greased, crying out at the delay: "Avast there! she's had tar enough," and so on again. Just as they were making a triumphal entry into Newcastle-upon-Tyne the wheels took fire, and the chaise, saturated with the liquor they had spilt in the course of their mad drive, burst into flames fore and aft. The sailors bellowed lustily for help, whereupon the spectators ran to their assistance and by swamping the ship with buckets of water succeeded in putting out the fire. Now it happened that in the crowd drawn together by such an unusual occurrence there was an impress officer who was greatly shocked by the exhibition. He considered that the sailors had been guilty of unseemly behaviour, and on that ground had them pressed. Notwithstanding their protections they were kept.

In his efforts to swell the returns of pressed men the gangsmen was supposed—we may even go so far as to say enjoined—to use no more violence than was absolutely necessary to attain his end. The question of force thus resolved itself into one of the degree of resistance he encountered. Needless to say, he did not always knock a man down before

bidding him stand in the king's name. Recourse to measures so extreme was not always necessary. Every sailor had not the pluck to fight, and even when he had both the pluck and the good-will, hard drinking, weary days of tramping, or long abstinence from food had perhaps sapped his strength, leaving him in no fit condition to hold his own in a scrap with the well-fed gangster. The latter consequently had it pretty much his own way. A firm hand on the shoulder, or at the most a short, sharp tussle, and the man was his. But there were exceptions to this easy rule, as we shall see in our next chapter.

Hunting the sailor was largely a matter of information, and unfortunately for his chances of escape informers were seldom wanting. Everywhere it was a game at hide-and-seek. Constables had orders to report him. Chapmen, drovers and soldiers, persons who were much on the road, kept a bright lookout for him. The crimp, habitually given to underhand practices, turned informer when prices for seamen ruled low in the service he usually catered for. His mistress loved him as long as his money lasted; when he had no more to throw away upon her she perfidiously betrayed him. And for all this there was a reason as simple as casting up the number of shillings in the pound. No matter how penniless the sailor himself might be, he was always worth that sum at the rendezvous. Twenty shillings was the reward paid for information leading to his apprehension as a straggler or a skulker, and it was largely on the strength of such informations, and often under the personal guidance of such detestable informers, that the gang went a-hunting.

Apart from greed of gain, the motive most commonly underlying informations was either jealousy or spite. Women were the greatest sinners in the first respect. Let the sailorman concealed by a woman only so much as look with favour upon another, and his fate was sealed. She gave him away, or, what was more profitable, sold him without regret. There were as good fish in the sea as ever came out. Perhaps better.

On the wings of spite and malice the escapades of youth often came home to roost after many years. Men who had run away to sea as lads, but had afterwards married and settled down, were informed on by evil-disposed persons who bore them some grudge, and torn from their families as having used the sea. Stephen Kemp, of Warbelton in Sussex, one of the many who suffered this fate, had indeed used the sea, but only for a single night on board a fishing-boat.¹

In face of these infamies it is good to read of how they dealt with informers at Newcastle-upon-Tyne. There the rôle was one fraught with peculiar danger. Rewards were paid by the Collector of Customs, and when a Newcastle man went to the Customs-House to claim the price of some sailor's betrayal, the people set upon him and incontinently broke his head. One notorious receiver of such rewards was "nearly murther'd." Thereafter informers had to be paid in private places for fear of the mob, and so many persons fell under suspicion of playing the dastardly game that the regulating captain was besieged by applicants for "certificates of innocency."²

¹ *Ad.* 1. 1445—Capt. Alms, 9 June 1777.

² *Ad.* 1. 1497—Letters of Capt. Bover, 1777.

Lieutenant Kelley, Lieutenant King, and Lieutenant Bevis, Pledge their Words of Honour, that no Seaman whatever shall be molested by their People, on Play-Nights, from the Hours of Four in the Afternoon to Six the following Morning, after which time the indulgence ceases.

BY DESIRE

OF THE

Members of the *Jerusalem Coffee-House.*

the THEATRE in North Shields.

On MONDAY, NOVEMBER 24th, 1794.

Will be performed A new COMEDY, called *The*

World in a Village:

OR, THE

TRIAL of FRIENDSHIP.

Written by that justly celebrated Author, J. O'KEEFE, ESQ., and performed a great many Nights last Season at the Theatre Royal, Covent-Garden, with general Approbation.

Jollyboy, (an honest Miller)	Mr CAWDELL.
Groggins, (Wine-merchant and Barber)	Mr PRITCHARD.
Albut, (a common Brewer)	Mr WATTS.
Captain Mullinahack, (a Sea Officer)	Mr NEWBOUND.
Old Willows, (a Steward)	Mr COLLIER.
Captain Vanluiten, (a Dutchman)	Mr WARWICK.
Edward Bellevue,	Mrs CAWDELL.
William Bellevue,	Mr WHEELER.
Old Soldier,	Mr HUGGINS.
Charles, (a fortunate Adventurer)	Mr GRAHAM.
Louisa,	Mrs COLLIER.
Mrs Albut,	Mrs NEWBOUND.
Maria Willows,	Mrs HUGGINS.
Margery Jollyboy,	Mrs WHEELER.
Mrs Bellevue, (a Lady)	Mrs O'KEEFE.

End of Act 4th, Mr NEWBOUND will sing a Comic Song, called

Paddy Bull's Journey from Dublin to London.

End of the Play, Mr CAWDELL will sing a Comic Song, called

The Tippies of Ninety Four:

OR,

The Golden Days we now Possess, Sir.

Before the Farce, Mrs HUGGINS (by Desire) will sing

"Yes Kind Sir and I'll Thank you too."

End of Act 2d of the Farce, Mr WHEELER will sing *Mr Shields'*

Hunting Song, in Dicks and Character, called

OLD TOWLER.

MIDNIGHT HOUR.

Diamond Cut Diamond.

General Don Guzman,	Mr GRAHAM.
Nicholas, (the unfortunate Valet)	Mr NEWBOUND.
	Mr WATTS.
	PRITCHARD.

ONE OF THE RAREST OF PRESS-GANG RECORDS.

A play-bill announcing the suspension of the Gang's operations on "Play Nights"; in the collection of Mr. A. M. Broadley, by whose kind permission it is reproduced.

Informations not infrequently took the form of anonymous communications addressed by the same hand to two different gangs at one and the same time, and when this was the case, and both gangs sallied forth in quest of the skulker, a collision was pretty sure to follow. Sometimes the encounter resolved itself into a running fight, in the course of which the poor sailor, who formed the bone of contention, was pressed and re-pressed several times over between his hiding-place and one or other of the rendezvous.

Rivalry between gangs engaged in ordinary pressing led to many a stirring encounter and bloody fracas. A gang sent out by H.M.S. *Thetis* was once attacked, while prowling about the waterside slums of Deptford, by "three or four different gangs, to the number of thirty men."¹ There was a greater demand for bandages than for sailors in Deptford during the rest of the night.

The most extraordinary affair of this description to be met with in the annals of pressing is perhaps one that occurred early in the reign of Queen Anne. Amongst the men-of-war then lying at Spithead were the *Dorsetshire*, Capt. Butler commander, and the *Medway*. Hearing that some sailors were in hiding at a place a little distance beyond Gosport, Capt. Butler dispatched his 1st and 2nd lieutenants, in charge of thirty of his best men, with instructions to take them and bring them on board. It so happened that a strong gang was at the same time on shore from the *Medway*, presumably on the same errand, and this party the *Dorsetshires*, returning to their ship with the seamen they had taken, found posted in

¹ *Ad.* I. 1502—Capt. Butcher, 29 Oct. 1782.

the Gosport road for the avowed purpose of re-pressing the pressed men. By a timely detour, however, they reached the waterside "without any mischief done."

Meanwhile, a rumour had somehow reached the ears of Capt. Butler to the effect that a fight was in progress and his 1st lieutenant killed. He immediately took boat and hurried over to Gosport, where, to his relief, he found his people all safe in their boats, but on the Point, to use his own graphic words, "severall hundred People, some with drawn Swords, some with Spitts, others with Clubbs, Staves & Stretchers. Some cry'd 'One & All!' others cry'd 'Medways!' and some again swearing, cursing & banning that they would knock my People's Brains out. Off I went with my Barge to the Longboat," continues the gallant captain, "commanding them to weigh their grappling & goe with me aboard. In the meantime off came about twelve Boats full with the *Medway's* men to lay my Longboat aboard, who surrounded us with Swords, Clubbs, Staves & divers Instruments, & nothing would do but all our Brains must be Knock't out. Finding how I defended the Longboat, they then undertook to attack myselfe and people. One of their Boats came upon the stern and made severall Blows at my Coxwain, and if it had not been for the Resolution I had taken to endure all these Abuses, I had Kill'd all those men with my own Hand; but this Boat in particular stuck close to me with only six men, and I kept a very good Eye upon her. All this time we were rowing out of the Harbour with these Boats about us as far as Portsmouth Point, my Coxwain wounded, myselfe and People dangerously assaulted with Stones which they brought from the

Beech & threw at us, and as their Boats drop'd off I took my opportunity & seized y^e Boat with the Six Men that had so attack'd me, and have secured them in Irons." With this the incident practically ended ; for although the Medways retaliated by seizing and carrying off the *Dorsetshire's* coxwain and a crew who ventured ashore next day with letters, the latter were speedily released ; but for a week Capt. Butler—fiery old Trojan ! who could have slain a whole boat's-crew with his own hand—remained a close prisoner on board his ship. "Should I but put my foot ashoar," we hear him growl, "I am murther'd that minute."¹

With certain exceptions presently to be noted, every man's hand was against the fugitive sailor, and this being so it followed as a matter of course that in his inveterate pursuit of him the gangster found more honourable allies than that nefarious person, the man-selling informer. The class whom the sailor himself, in his contempt of the good feeding he never shared, nicknamed "big-bellied placemen"—the pompous mayors, the portly aldermen and the county magistrate who knew a good horse or hound but precious little law, were almost to a man the gangster's coadjutors. Lavishly wine and dined at Admiralty expense, they urbanely "backed" the regulating captain's warrants, consistently winked at his glaring infractions of law and order, and with the most commendable loyalty imaginable did all in their power to forward His Majesty's service. Even the military, if rightly approached on their pinnacle of lofty superiority, now and then condescended to lend

¹ *Ad.* 1, 1467—Capt. Butler, 1 June 1705.

the gangster a hand. Did not Sloper, Major-General and Commandant at Lewes, throw a whole company into the siege of Brighton?

These post-prandial concessions on the part of bigwigs desirous of currying favour in high places on the whole told heavily against the sorely harassed object of the gangster's quest, rendering it, amongst other things, extremely unsafe for him to indulge in those unconventional outbursts which, under happier conditions, so uniformly marked his jovial moods. At the playhouse, for example, he could not heave empty bottles or similar tokens of appreciation upon the stage without grave risk of incurring the fate that overtook Steven David, Samuel Jenkins and Thomas Williams, three sailors of Falmouth town who, merely because they adopted so unusual a mode of applauding a favourite, were by magisterial order handed over to Lieut. Box of H.M.S. *Blonde*, with a peremptory request that they should be transferred forthwith to that floating stage where the only recognised "turns" were those of the cat and the capstan.¹

Luckily for the sailor and those of other callings who shared his liability to the press, the civil authorities did not range themselves on the gangster's side with complete unanimity. Local considerations of trade, coupled with some faint conception of the hideous injustice the seafaring classes groaned under, and groaned in vain, here and there outweighed patriotism and dinners. Little by little a cantankerous spirit of opposition got abroad, and every now and then, at this point or at that, some mayor or alderman, obsessed by this spirit beyond his fellows and his

¹ *Ad.* 1. 1537—Capt. Ballard, 13 Dec. 1806.

time, seized such opportunities as office threw in his way to mark his disapproval of the wrongs the sailor suffered. Had this attitude been more general, or more consistent in itself, the press-gang would not have endured for a day.

The rôle of Richard Yea and Nay was, however, the favourite one with urban authorities. Towns at first not "inclinable to allow a pressing," afterwards relented and took the gang to their bosom, or entertained it gladly for a time, only to cast it out with contumely. A lieutenant who was sent to Newcastle to press in 1702 found "no manner of encouragement there"; yet seventy-five years later the Tyneside city, thanks to the loyal co-operation of a long succession of mayors and of such men as George Stephenson, sometime Deputy-Master of the Trinity House, had become one of the riskiest in the kingdom for the seafaring man who was a stranger within her gates.¹

The attitude of Poole differed in some respects from that of other towns. Her mayors and magistrates, while they did not actually oppose the pressing of seamen within the borough, would neither back the warrants nor lend the gangs their countenance. The reason advanced for this disloyal attitude was of the absurdest nature. Poole held that in order to press twenty men you were not at liberty to kill the twenty-first. That, in fact, was what had happened on board the *Maria* brig as she came into port there, deeply laden with fish from the Banks, and the corporation very foolishly never forgot the trivial incident.

¹ *Ad.* I. 1498—Capt. Bover, 11 Aug. 1778,

It did not, of course, follow that the Poole sailor enjoyed freedom from the press. Far from it. What he did enjoy was a reputation that, if not all his own, was yet sufficiently so to be shared by few. Bred in that roughest of all schools, the Newfoundland cod fishery, he was an exceptionally tough nut to crack.

“If Poole were a fish pool
And the men of Poole fish,
There'd be a pool for the devil
And fish for his dish,”

was how the old jibe ran, and in this estimate of the Poole man's character the gangs fully concurred. They knew him well and liked him little, so when bent on pressing him they adopted no squeamish measures, but very wisely “trusted to the strength of their right arms for it.” Some of their attempts to take him make strange reading.

About eight o'clock on a certain winter's evening, Regulating Captain Walbeoff, accompanied by Lieut. Osmer, a midshipman and eight gangsmen, broke into the house of William Trim, a seafaring native of the place whom they knew to be at home and had resolved to press. Alarmed by the forcing of the door, and only too well aware of what it portended, Trim made for the stairs, where, turning upon his pursuers, he struck repeatedly and savagely at the midshipman, who headed them, with a red-hot poker which he had snatched out of the fire at the moment of his flight. He was, however, quickly overpowered, disarmed and dragged back into the lower room, where his captors threw him violently to the floor and with their hangers took effective measures to prevent

his escape or further opposition. His sister happened to be in the house, and whilst this was going on the lieutenant brutally assaulted her, presumably because she wished to go to her brother's assistance. Meanwhile Trim's father, a man near seventy years of age, who lived only a stone's-throw away, hearing the uproar, and being told the gang had come for his son, ran to the house with the intention, as he afterwards declared, of persuading him to go quietly. Seeing him stretched upon the floor, he stooped to lift him to his feet, when one of the gang attacked him and stabbed him in the back. He fell bleeding beside the younger man, and was there beaten by a number of the gangsmen whilst the remainder dragged his son off to the press-room, whence he was in due course dispatched to the fleet at Spithead. The date of this brutal episode is 1804; the manner of it, "nothing more than what usually happened on such occasions" in the town of Poole.¹

For this deplorable state of things Poole had none but herself to thank. Had she, instead of merely refusing to back the warrants, taken effective measures to rid herself of the gang, that mischievous body would have soon left her in peace. Rochester wore the jewel of consistency in this respect. When Lieut. Brenton pressed a youth there who "appeared to be a seafaring man," but turned out to be an exempt city apprentice, he was promptly arrested and deprived of his sword, the mayor making no bones of telling him that his warrant was "useless in Rochester." With this broad hint he was discharged; but the people

¹ *Ad. I.* 580—Admiral Phillip, Inquiry into the Conduct of the Impress Officers at Poole, 13 Aug. 1804.

proved less lenient than the mayor, for they set about him and beat him unmercifully.¹

Save on a single occasion, already incidentally referred to, civic Liverpool treated the gang with uniform kindness. In 1745, at a time when the rebels were reported to be within only four miles of the city, the mayor refused to back warrants for the pressing of sailors to protect the shipping in the river. His reason was a cogent one. The captains of the *South-sea Castle*, the *Mercury* and the *Loo*, three ships of war then in the Mersey, had just recently "manned their boats with marines and impressed from the shore near fifty men," and the seafaring element of the town, always a formidable one, was up in arms because of it. This so intimidated the mayor that he dared not sanction further raids "for fear of being murder'd."² His dread of the armed sailor was not shared by Henry Alcock, sometime mayor of Waterford. That gentleman "often headed the press-gangs" in person.³

Deal objected to the press for reasons extending back to the reign of King John. As a member of the Cinque Ports that town had constantly supplied the kings and queens of the realm, from the time of Magna Charta downwards, with great numbers of able and sufficient seamen who, according to the ancient custom of the Five Ports, had been impressed and raised by the mayor and magistrates of the town, acting under orders from the Lord Warden, and not

¹ *Ad.* 7. 301—Law Officers' Opinions, 1784-92, No. 42: Deposition of Lieut. Brenton.

² *Ad.* 1. 1440—Letters of Capt. Amherst, Dec. 1745.

³ *Ad.* 1. 1500—Capt. Bennett, 13 Nov. 1780.

by irresponsible gangs from without. It was to these, and not to the press as such, that Deal objected. The introduction of gangs in her opinion bred disorder. Great disturbances, breaches of the peace, riots, tumults and even bloodshed attended their steps and made their presence in any peaceably disposed community highly undesirable. Within the memory of living man even, Deal had obliged no less than four hundred seamen to go on board the ships of the fleet, and she desired no more of those strangers who recently, incited by Admiral the Marquis of Carmarthen, had gone a-pressing in her streets and grievously wounded divers persons.¹

In this commonsense view of the case Deal was ably supported by Dover, the premier Cinque Port. Dover, it is true, so far as we know never embodied her objections to the press in any humble petition to the Queen's Majesty. She chose instead a directer method, for when the lieutenant of the *Devonshire* impressed six men belonging to a brigantine from Carolina in her streets, and attempted to carry them beyond the limits of the borough, "many people of Dover, in company with the Mayor thereof, assembled themselves together and would not permit the lieutenant to bring them away." The action angered the Lords Commissioners, who resolved to teach Dover a lesson. Orders were accordingly sent down to Capt. Dent, whose ship the *Shrewsbury* man-o'-war was then in the Downs, directing him to send a gang ashore and press the first six good seamen they should meet with, taking care, however, since their Lordships

¹ *State Papers Domestic*, Anne, xxxvi. No. 24: Petition of the Mayor, Jurats and Commonalty of the Free Town and Borough of Deal.

did not wish to be too hard upon the town, that the men so pressed were bachelors and not householders. Lieut. O'Brien was entrusted with this delicate punitive mission. He returned on board after a campaign of only a few hours' duration, triumphantly bearing with him the stipulated hostages for Dover's future good behaviour—"six very good seamen, natives and inhabitants, and five of them bachelors."¹ The sixth was of course a householder, a circumstance that made the town's punishment all the severer.

Its effects were less salutary than the Admiralty had anticipated. True, both Dover and Deal thereafter withdrew their opposition to the press so far as to admit the gang within their borders; but they kept a watchful eye upon its doings, and every now and then the old spirit flamed out again at white heat, consuming the bonds of some poor devil who, like Alexander Hart, freeman of Dover, had been irregularly taken. On this occasion the mayor, backed by a posse of constables, himself broke open the press-room door. A similar incident, occurring a little later in the same year, so incensed Capt. Ball, who aptly enough was at the time in command of the *Nemesis*, that he roundly swore "to impress every seafaring man in Dover and make them repent of their impudence."²

Where the magistrate had it most in his power to make or mar the fugitive sailor's chances was in connection with the familiar fiction that the Englishman's house is his castle. To hide a sailor was to steal

¹ *Ad.* 1. 1696—Capt. Dent, 24 Aug. 1743.

² *Ad.* 7. 301—Law Officers' Opinions, 1784-92, No. 44; *Ad.* 1. 1507—Capt. Ball, 15 April 1791.

the king's chattel—penalty, £5 forfeited to the parish ; and if you were guilty of such a theft, or were with good reason suspected of being guilty, you found yourself in much the same case as the ordinary thief or the receiver of stolen goods. A search warrant could be sworn out before a magistrate, and your house ransacked from cellar to garret. Without such warrant, however, it could not be lawfully entered. In the heat of pressing forcible entry was nevertheless not unusual, and many an impress officer found himself involved in actions for trespass or damages in consequence of his own indiscretion or the excessive zeal of his gang. The defence set up by Lieut. Doyle, of Dublin, that the "Panel of the Door was Broke by Accident," would not go down in a court of law, however avidly it might be swallowed by the Board of Admiralty.

More than this. The magistrate was by law empowered to seize all straggling seamen and landmen and hand them over to the gangs for consignment to the fleet. The vagabond, as the unfortunate tramp of those days was commonly called, had thus a bad time of it. For him all roads led to Spithead. The same was true of persons who made themselves a public nuisance in other ways. By express magisterial order many answering to that description followed Francis Juniper of Cuckfield, "a very drunken, troublesome fellow, without a coat to his back," who was sent away lest he should become "chargeable to the parish." The magistrate in this way conferred a double benefit upon his country. He defended it against itself whilst helping it to defend itself against the French. Still, the latter benefit was

not always above suspicion. The "ignorant zeal of simple justices," we are told, often impelled them to hand over to the gangs men whom "any old woman could see with half an eye to be properer objects of pity and charity than fit to serve His Majesty."

"Send your myrmidons," was a form of summons familiar to every gang officer. As its tone implies, its source was magisterial, and when the officer received it he hastened with his gang to the Petty Sessions, the Assizes or the prison, and there took over, as an unearned increment of His Majesty's fleet, the person of some misdemeanant willing to exchange bridewell for the briny, or the manacled body of some convicted felon who preferred to swing in a hammock at sea rather than on the gallows ashore.

A strangely assorted crew it was, this overflow of the jails that clanked slowly seawards, marshalled by the gang. Reprieves and commutations, if by no means universal in a confirmed hanging age, were yet common enough to invest it with an appalling sameness that was nevertheless an appalling variety. Able seamen sentenced for horse-stealing or rioting, town dwellers raided out of night-houses, impostors who simulated fits or played the maimed soldier, fishermen in the illicit brandy and tobacco line, gentlemen of the road, makers of "flash" notes and false coin, stealers of sheep, assaulters of women, pickpockets and murderers in one unmitigated throng went the way of the fleet and there sank their vices, their roguery, their crimes and their identity in the number of a mess.

Boys were in that flock of jail-birds too—youths

barely in their teens, guilty of such heinous offences as throwing stones at people who passed in boats upon the river, or of "playing during divine service on Sunday" and remaining impenitent and obdurate when confronted with all the "terrific apparatus of fetters, chains and dark cells" pertaining to a well-equipped city jail.¹ The turning over of such young reprobates to the gang was one of the pleasing duties of the magistrate.

¹ *Ad. I.* 1534, 1545—Capt. Barker, 1 March 1805, 20 Aug. 1809, and numerous instances.

CHAPTER VIII

AT GRIPS WITH THE GANG

WHEN all avenues of escape were cut off and the sailor found himself face to face with the gang and imminent capture, he either surrendered his liberty at the word of command or staked it on the issue of a fight.

His choice of the latter alternative was the proverbial turning of the worm, but of a worm that was no mean adversary. Fear of the gang, supposing him to entertain any, was thrown to the winds. Fear of the consequences—the clink, or maybe the gallows for a last land-fall—which had restrained him in less critical moments when he had both room to run and opportunity, sat lightly on him now. In red realism there flashed through his brain the example of some doughty sailor, the hero of many an anchor-watch and forecastle yarn, who had fought the gang to its last man and yet come off victor. The swift vision fired his blood and nerved his arm, and under its obsession he stood up to his would-be captors with all the dogged pluck for which he was famous when facing the enemy at sea.

In contests of this description the weapon perhaps counted for as much as the man who wielded it, and as its nature depended largely upon circumstances

and surroundings, the range of choice was generally wide enough to please the most elective taste. Pressing consequently introduced the gangster to some strange weapons.

Trim, the Poole sailor whose capture is narrated in the foregoing chapter, defended himself with a red-hot poker. In what may be termed domestic as opposed to public pressing, the use of this homely utensil as an impromptu liberty-preserver was not at all uncommon. Hot or cold, it proved a formidable weapon in the hands of a determined man, more especially when, as was at that time very commonly the case, it belonged to the ponderous cobiron or knobbed variety.

Another weapon of recognised utility, particularly in the vicinity of docks, careening-stations and ship-yards, was the humble tar-mop. Consisting of a wooden handle some five or six feet in length, though of no great diameter, terminating in a ball of spun-yarn forming the actual mop, this implement, when new, was comparatively harmless. No serious blow could then be dealt with it; but once it had been used for "paying" a vessel's bottom and sides it underwent a change that rendered it truly formidable. The ball of ravellings forming the mop became then thoroughly charged with tar or pitch and dried in a rough mass scarcely less heavy than lead. In this condition it was capable of inflicting a terrible blow, and many were the tussels decided by it. A remarkable instance of its effective use occurred at Ipswich in 1703, when a gang from the *Solebay*, rowing up the Orwell from Harwich, attempted to press the men engaged in re-paying a collier. They were

immediately "struck down with Pitch-Mopps, to the great Peril of their Lives."¹

The weapon to which the sailor was most partial, however, was the familiar capstan-bar. In it, as in its fellow the handspike, he found a whole armament. Its availability, whether on shipboard or at the water-side, its rough-and-ready nature, and above all its heft and general capacity for dealing a knock-down blow without inflicting necessarily fatal injuries, adapted it exactly to the sailor's requirements, defensive or the reverse. It was with a capstan-bar that Paul Jones, when hard pressed by a gang on board his ship at Liverpool, was reputed to have stretched three of his assailants dead on deck. Every sailor had heard of that glorious achievement and applauded it, the killing perhaps grudgingly excepted.

So, too, did he applaud the hardihood of William Bingham, that far-famed north-country sailor who, adopting pistols as his weapon, negligently stuck a brace of them in his belt and walked the streets of Newcastle in open defiance of the gangs, none of which durst lay a hand on him till the unlucky day when, in a moment of criminal carelessness that could never be forgiven, he left his weapons at home and was haled to the press-room fighting, all too late, like a fiend incarnate.

Not to enlarge on the endless variety of chance weapons, there remained those good old-standers the musket, the cutlass and the knife, each of which, in the sailor's grasp, played its part in the rough-and-tumble of pressing, and played it well. A case in point, familiar to every seaman, was the last fight

¹ *Ad. I.* 1436—Capt. Aldred, 6 Jan. 1702-3.

put up by that famous Plymouth sailor, Emanuel Herbert, another fatalist who, like Bingham, believed in having two strings to his bow. He accordingly provided himself with both fuzee and hanger, and with these comforting bed-fellows retired to rest in an upper chamber of the public-house where he lodged, easy in the knowledge that whatever happened the door of his crib commanded the stairs. From this stronghold the gang invited him to come down. He returned the compliment by inviting them up, assuring them that he had a warm welcome in store for the first who should favour him with a visit. The ambiguity of the invitation appears to have been thrown away upon the gang, for "three of my people," says the officer who led them, "rushed up, and the gun missing fire, he immediately run one of them through the body with the hanger"—a mode of welcoming his visitors which resulted in Herbert's shifting his lodgings to Exeter jail, and in the wounded man's speedy death.¹

Here was a serious contingency indeed ; but whatever deterrent effect the fatal issue of this affair, as of many similar ones, may have had upon the sailor's use of lethal weapons when attacked by the gang, that effect was largely, if not altogether, neutralised by the upshot of the famous Broadfoot case, which, occurring some sixteen years later, gave the scales of justice a decided turn in the sailor's favour and robbed the killing of a gangster of its only terror, the shadow of the gallows. The incident in question opened in Bristol river, with the boarding of a merchantman by a tender's gang. As they came over the side

¹ *Ad. I.* 1473—Capt. Brown, 4 July 1727.

Broadfoot met them, blunderbuss in hand. Being there to guard the ship, he bade them begone, and upon their disregarding the order, and closing in upon him with evident intent to take him, he clapped the blunderbuss, which was heavily charged with swan-shot, to his shoulder and let fly into the midst of them. One of their number, Calahan by name, fell mortally wounded, and Broadfoot was in due course indicted for wilful murder.¹ How he was found not guilty on the ground that a warrant directed to the lieutenant gave the gang no power to take him, and that he was therefore justified in defending himself, was well known to every sailor in the kingdom. No jury thereafter ever found him guilty of a capital felony if by chance he killed a gangsmen in self-defence. The worst he had to fear was a verdict of manslaughter—a circumstance that proved highly inspiring to him in his frequent scraps with the gang.

There was another aspect of the case, however, that came home to the sailor rather more intimately than the risk of being called upon to “do time” under conditions scarcely worse than those he habitually endured at sea. Suppose, instead of his killing the gangsmen, the gangsmen killed him? He recalled a case he had heard much palaver about. An able seaman, a perfect Tom Bowling of a fellow, brought to at an alehouse in the Borough—the old “Bull’s Head” it was—having a mind to lie snug for a while, ’tween voyages. However, one day, being three sheets in the wind or thereabouts, he risked a run and was made a prize of, worse luck, by

¹ *Westminster Journal*, 30 April 1743.

a press-gang that engaged him. Their boat lay at Battle Bridge in the Narrow Passage, and while they were bearing down upon her, with the sailor-chap in tow, what should Jack do but out with his knife and slip it into one of the gangers. 'Twas nothing much, a waistcoat wound at most, but the ganger resented the liberty, and swearing that no man should tap his claret for nix, he ups with his cudgel and fetches Jack a clip beside the head that lost him the number of his mess, for soon after he was discharged dead along of having his head broke.¹

Risks of this sort raised grave issues for the sailor—issues to be well considered of in those serious moments that came to the most reckless on the wings of the wind or the lift of the waves at sea, what time drink and the gang were remote factors in the problem of life. But ashore! Ah! that was another matter. Life ashore was far too crowded, far too sweet for serious reflections. The absorbing business of pleasure left little room for thought, and the thoughts that came to the sailor later, when he had had his fling and was again afoot in search of a ship, decidedly favoured the killing of a gangster, if need be, rather than the loss of his own life or of a berth. The prevalence of these sentiments rendered the taking of the sailor a dangerous business, particularly when he consorted in bands.

In that part of the west country traversed by the great roads from Bristol to Liverpool, and having Stourbridge as its approximate centre, ambulatory

¹ *Ad. I.* 1486—Lieut. Slyford, 24 Nov. 1755. "Discharged dead," abbreviated to "DD," the regulation entry in the muster books against the names of persons deceased,

bands proved very formidable. The presence of the rendezvous at Stourbridge accounted for this. Seamen travelled in strength because they feared it. Two gangs were stationed there under Capt. Beecher, and news of the approach of a large party of seamen from the south having one day been brought in, he at once made preparations for intercepting them. Lieut. Barnsley and his gang marched direct to Hoo-brook, a couple of miles south of Kidderminster, a point the seamen had perforce to pass. His instructions were to wait there, picking up in the meantime such of the sailor party as lagged behind from foot-soreness or fatigue, till joined by Lieut. Birchall and the other gang, when the two were to unite forces and press the main body. Through unforeseen circumstances, however, the plan miscarried. Birchall, who had taken a circuitous route, arrived late, whilst the band of sailors arrived early. They numbered, moreover, forty-six as against eleven gangsmen and two officers. Four to one was a temptation the sailors could not resist. They attacked the gangs with such ferocity that out of the thirteen only one man returned to the rendezvous with a whole skin. Luckily, there were no casualties on this occasion; but a few days later, while two of Barnsley's gangsmen were out on duty some little distance from the town, they were suddenly attacked by a couple of sailors, presumably members of the same band, who left one of them dead in the road.¹

Owing to its close proximity to the Thames, that remote suburb of eighteenth century London known as Stepney Fields was much frequented by armed

¹ *Ad. I.* 1501—Capt. Beecher, 12 July and 4 Aug. 1781,

bands of the above description, who successfully resisted all attempts to take them. The master-at-arms of the *Chatham* man-o'-war, chancing once to pass that way, came in for exceedingly rough usage at their hands, and when next day a lieutenant from the same ship appeared upon the scene with a gang at his back and tried to press the ringleaders in that affair, they "swore by God he should not, and if he offered to lay hands on them, they would cut him down." With this threat they drew their cutlasses, slashed savagely at the lieutenant, and "made off through the Mobb which had gathered round them."¹

A spot not many miles distant from Stepney Fields was the scene of a singular fray many years later. His Majesty's ship *Squirrel* happened at the time to be lying in Longreach, and her commander, Capt. Brawn, one day received intelligence that a number of sailors were to be met with in the town of Barking. He at once dispatched his 1st and 2nd lieutenants with a contingent of twenty-five men and several petty officers, to rout them out and take them. They reached Barking about nine o'clock in the evening, the month being July, and were not long in securing several of the skulkers, who with many of the male inhabitants of the place were at that hour congregated in public-houses, unsuspecting of danger. The sudden appearance in their midst of so large an armed force, however, coupled with the outcry and confusion inseparable from the pressing of a number of men, alarmed the townsfolk, who poured into the streets, rescued the pressed men, and would have inflicted summary punishment upon the intruders

¹ *Ad. R.* 2579—Capt. Townshend, 21 April 1743.

had not the senior officer, seeing his party hopelessly outnumbered, tactfully drawn off his force. This he did in good order and without serious hurt ; but just as he and his men were congratulating themselves upon their escape, they were suddenly ambushed, at a point where their road ran between high banks, by a "large concourse of Irish haymakers, to the number of at least five hundred men, all armed with sabres¹ and pitchforks," who with wild cries and all the Irishman's native love of a shindy fell upon the unfortunate gangsmen and gave them a "most severe beating."²

Attacks on the gang, made with deliberate intent to rescue pressed men from its custody, were by no means confined to Barking. The informer thrived in the land, but notwithstanding his hostile activity the sailor everywhere had friends who possessed at least one cardinal virtue. They seldom hung back when he was in danger, or hesitated to strike a blow in his defence.

There came into Limehouse Hole, on a certain day in the summer of 1709, a vessel called the *Martin* galley. How many men were in her we do not learn ; but whatever their number, there was amongst them one man who had either a special dread of the press or some more than usually urgent occasion for wishing to avoid it. Watching his opportunity, he slipped into one of the galley's boats, sculled her rapidly to land, and there leapt out—just as a press-gang hove in sight ahead ! It was a dramatic moment. The sailor, tacking at sight of the enemy,

¹ So in the original, but "sabres" is perhaps an error for "scythes."

² *Ad. I.* 1529—Capt. Brawn, 3 July 1803.

ran swiftly along the river-bank, but was almost immediately overtaken, knocked down, and thrown into the press-boat, which lay near by. "This gather'd a Mob," says the narrator of the incident, "who Pelted the Boat and Gang by throwing Stones and Dirt from the Shoar, and being Pursued also by the Galley's men, who brought Cutlasses in the Boat with them to rescue their Prest Man, the Gang was at last forc'd to betake themselves to a Corn-lighter, where they might stand upon their Defence. The Galley's men could not get aboard, but lay with their Boat along the side of the Lighter, where they endeavouring to force in, and the Gang to keep them out, the Boat of a sudden oversett and some of the Men therein were Drown'd. Three of the Press-Gang were forc'd likewise into the Water, whereof 'tis said one is Drown'd and the other two in Irons in the New Prison. The remaining part of the Gang leapt into a Wherry, the Galley's men pursuing them, but, not gaining upon them, they gave over the Pursuit." The pressed man all this while was laughing in his sleeve. "He lay on the other side of the Lighter, in the Tender's boat, whence he made his escape."¹

In their efforts to restore the freedom of the pressed man, the sailor's friends did not confine their attention exclusively to the gang. When they turned out in vindication of those rights which the sailor did not possess, they not infrequently found their diversion in wrecking the gang's headquarters or in making a determined, though generally futile, onslaught upon the tender. Respectable people, who

¹ *Ad. I.* 1437—Capt. Aston, 10 Aug. 1709.

had no particular reason to favour the sailor's cause, viewed these ebullitions of mingled rage and mischief with dismay, stigmatising those who so lightheartedly participated in them as the "lower classes" and the "mob."

Few towns in the kingdom boasted—or reprobated, as the case might be—a more erratically festive mob than Leith. As far back as 1709 Bailie Cockburn had advised the inhabitants of that burgh to "oppose any impressor," and seizing the occasion of the "Impressure of an Apprentice Boy," had set them an example by arresting the pinnacle of Her Majesty's ship *Rye*, together with her whole crew, thirteen in number, and keeping them in close confinement till the lad was given up.¹ The worthy Bailie was in due time gathered unto his fathers, and with the growth of the century gangs came and went in endless succession, but neither the precept nor the example was ever forgotten in Leith. Much pressing was done there, but it was done almost entirely upon the water. To transfer the scene of action to the strand meant certain tumult, for there the whim of the mob was law. Now it pulled the gang-officer's house about his ears because he dared to press a shipwright; again, it stoned the gang viciously because they rescued some seamen from a wreck—and kept them. Between whiles it amused itself by cutting down the rendezvous flag-staff; and if nothing better offered, it split up into component parts, each of which became a greater terror than the whole. One night, when the watch had been set and all was quiet, a party of this description, only three in number,

¹ *Ad.* I. 2448—Capt. Shale, 4 Jan. 1708-9.

approached the rendezvous and respectfully requested leave to drink a last dram with some newly pressed men who were then in the cage, their quondam shipmates. Suspecting no ulterior design, the guard incautiously admitted them, whereupon they dashed a quantity of spirits on the fire, set the place in a blaze, and carried off the pressed men amid the hullabaloo that followed.¹

If Leith did this sort of thing well, Greenock, her commercial rival on the Clyde, did it very much better; for where the Leith mob was but a sporadic thing, erupting from its slummy fastnesses only in response to rumour of chance amusement to be had or mischief to be done, Greenock held her mob always in hand, a perpetual menace to the gangster. did he dare to disregard the Clydeside ordinance in respect to pressing. That ordinance restricted pressing exclusively to the water; but it went further, for it laid it down as an inviolable rule that members of certain trades should not be pressed at all.

It was with the Trades that the ordinance originated. There was little or no Greenock apart from the Trades. The will of the Trades was supreme. The coopers, carpenters, riggers, caulkers and seamen of the town ruled the burgh. Assembled in public meeting, they resolved unanimously "to stand by and support each other" in the event of a press; and having come to this decision they indited a trite letter to the magistrates, intimating in unequivocal terms that "if they countenanced

¹ *Ad. I.* 1516-9—Letters of Capt. Brenton, 1797-8; Lieut. Pierie, 2 Feb. 1798.

the press, they must abide by the consequences," for once the Trades took the matter in hand "they could not say where they would stop." With the worthy burgesses laying down the law in this fashion, it is little wonder that the gangs "seldom dared to press ashore," or that they should have been able to take "only two coopers in ten months."

For the Trades were as good as their word. The moment a case of prohibited pressing became known they took action. Alexander Weir, member of the Shipwrights' Society, was taken whilst returning from his "lawful employ," and immediately his mates, to the number of between three and four hundred, downed tools and marched to the rendezvous, where they peremptorily demanded his release. Have him they would, and if the gang-officer did not see fit to comply with their demand, not only should he never press another man in Greenock, but they would seize one of the armed vessels in the river, lay her alongside the tender, where Weir was confined, and take him out of her by force. Brenton was regulating captain there at the time, and to pacify the mob he promised to release the man—and broke his word. Thereupon the people "became very riotous and proceeded to burn everything that came in their way. About twelve o'clock they hauled one of the boats belonging to the rendezvous upon the Square and put her into the fire, but by the timely assistance of the officers and gangs, supported by the magistrates and a body of the Fencibles, the boat was recovered, though much damaged, and several of the ringleaders taken up and sent to prison." The affair did not end without bloodshed. "Lieut. Harrison, in defending

himself, was under the necessity of running one of the rioters through the ribs.”¹

Though Bailie Cockburn once “arrested” the pinnacle of a man-o’-war at Leith, the attempted burning of the Greenock press-boat is worthy of more than passing note as the only instance of that form of retaliation to be met with in the history of home pressing. In the American colonies, on the other hand, it was a common feature of demonstrations against the gang. Boston was specially notorious for that form of reprisal, and Governor Shirley, in one of his masterly dispatches, narrates at length, and with no little humour, how the mob on one occasion burnt with great éclat what they believed to be the press-boat, only to discover, when it was reduced to ashes, that it belonged to one of their own ringleaders.²

The threat of the Greenock artificers to lay alongside the tender and take out their man by force of arms was one for which there existed abundant, if by no means encouraging precedent. Long before, as early, indeed, as 1742, the keelmen frequenting Sunderland had set them an example in that respect by endeavouring, some hundreds strong, to haul the tender ashore—an attempt coupled with threats so dire that the officer in command trembled in his shoes lest he and his men should all “be made sacrifices of.”³ Nothing so dreadful happened, however, for the attempt, like that made at Shoreham a few years later, when there “appear’d in Sight, from towards Brighthelmstone, about two or three

¹ *Ad.* I. 1508—Letters of Capt. Brenton, 1793.

² *Ad.* I. 3818—Shirley to the Admiralty, 1 Dec. 1747.

³ *Ad.* I. 1439—Capt. Allen, 13 March 1741-2.

Hundred Men arm'd with different Weapons, who came with an Intent to Attack the *Dispatch* sloop," failed ignominiously, the attackers being routed on both occasions by a timely use of swivel guns and musketry.¹

Similar disaster overtook the organisers of the Tooley Street affair, of which one Taylor, lieutenant to Capt. William Boys of the *Royal Sovereign*, was the active cause. At the "Spread-Eagle" in Tooley Street he and his gang one evening pressed a privateersman—an insult keenly resented by the master of the ship. He accordingly sent off to the tender, whither the pressed man had been conveyed for security's sake, two wherries filled with armed seamen of the most piratical type. The fierce fight that ensued had a dramatic finish. "Two Pistols we took from them," says the narrator of the incident, in his quaint old style, "and three Cutlasses, and Six Men; but one of the Men took the Red Hott Poker out of the Fire, and our Men, having the Cutlasses, Cutt him and Kill'd him in Defence of themselves."²

In attacks of this nature the fact that the tender was afloat told heavily in her favour, for unless temporarily hung up upon a mud-bank by the fall of the tide, she could only be got at by means of boats. With the rendezvous ashore the case was altogether different. Here you had a building in a public street, flaunting its purpose provocatively in your very face, and having a rear to guard as well as a front. For these reasons attacks on the rendezvous were generally attended with a greater measure of success than

¹ *Ad. I.* 1482—Lieut. Barnsley, 25 March 1746.

² *Ad. I.* 1488—Lieut. Taylor, 1 April 1757.

similar attempts directed against the tenders. The face of a pressed man had only to show itself at one of the stoutly barred windows, and immediately a crowd gathered. To the prisoner behind the bars this crowd was friendly, commiserating or chaffing him by turns ; but to the gangsmen responsible for his being there it was invariably and uncompromisingly hostile, so much so that it needed only a carelessly uttered threat, or a thoughtlessly lifted hand, to fan the smouldering fires of hatred into a blaze. When this occurred, as it often did, things happened. Paving-stones hurtled through the curse-laden air, the windows flew in fragments, the door, assailed by overwhelming numbers, crashed in, and despite the stoutest resistance the gang could offer the pressed man was hustled out and carried off in triumph.

The year 1755 witnessed a remarkable attack of this description upon the rendezvous at Deal, where a band of twenty-seven armed men made a sudden descent upon that obnoxious centre of activity and cut up the gang most grievously. As all wore masks and had their faces blackened, identification was out of the question. A reward of £200, offered for proof of complicity in the outrage, elicited no information, and as a matter of fact its perpetrators were never discovered.

In Capt. McCleverty's time the gang at Waterford was once very roughly handled whilst taking in a pressed man, and Mr. Mayor Alcock came hurrying down to learn what was amiss. He found the rendezvous beset by an angry and dangerous gathering. "Sir," said he to the captain, "have you

no powder or shot in the house?" McCleverty assured him that he had. "Then, sir," cried the mayor, raising his voice so that all might hear, "do you make use of it, and I will support you." The crowd understood that argument and immediately dispersed.¹

Had the Admiralty reasoned in similar terms with those who beat its gangsmen, converted its rendezvous into match-wood and carried off its pressed men, it would have quickly made itself as heartily feared as it was already hated; but in seeking to shore up an odious cause by pacific methods it laid its motives open to the gravest misconstruction. Prudence was construed into timidity, and with every abstention from lead the sailor's mobbish friends grew more daring and outrageous.

One night in the winter of 1780, whilst Capt. Worth of the Liverpool rendezvous sat lamenting the temporary dearth of seamen, Lieut. Haygarth came rushing in with a rare piece of news. On the road from Lancaster, it was reported, there was a whole coach-load of sailors. The chance was too good to be lost, and instant steps were taken to intercept the travellers. The gangs turned out, fully armed, and took up their position at a strategic point, just outside the town, commanding the road by which the sailors had to pass. By and by along came the coach, the horses weary, the occupants nodding or asleep. In a trice they were surrounded. Some of the gangsmen sprang at the horses' heads, others threw themselves upon the drowsy passengers. Shouts, curses and the thud of blows broke the

¹ *Ad. I.* 1500—Deposition of Lieut. M'Kellop, 1780.

silence of the night. Then the coach rumbled on again, empty. Its late occupants, fifteen in number, sulkily followed on foot, surrounded by their captors, who, as soon as the town was reached, locked them into the press-room for the rest of the night, it being the captain's intention to put them on board the tender in the Mersey at break of day.

In this, however, he was frustrated by a remarkable development in the situation. Unknown to him, the coach-load of seamen had been designed for the *Stag* privateer, a vessel just on the point of sailing. News of their capture reaching the ship soon after their arrival in the town, Spence, her 1st lieutenant, at once roused out all his available men, armed them, to the number of eighty, with cutlass and pistol, and led them ashore. There all was quiet, favouring their design. The hour was still early, and the silent, swift march through the deserted streets attracted no attention and excited no alarm. At the rendezvous the opposition of the weary sentinels counted for little. It was quickly brushed aside, the strong-room door gave way beneath a few well-directed blows, and by the time Liverpool went to breakfast the *Stag* privateer was standing out to sea, her crew not only complete, but ably supplemented by eight additional occupants of the press-room who had never, so far as is known, travelled in that commodious vehicle, the Lancaster coach.¹

The neighbouring city of Chester in 1803 matched this exploit by another of great audacity. Chester had long been noted for its hostility to the gang, and the fact that the local volunteer corps—

¹ *Ad.* 7. 300—Law Officers' Opinions, 1778-83, No. 19.

the Royal Chester Artillery—was composed mainly of ropemakers, riggers, shipwrights and sailmakers who had enlisted for the sole purpose of evading the press, did not tend to allay existing friction. Hence, when Capt. Birchall brought over a gang from Liverpool because he could not form one in Chester itself, and when he further signalled his arrival by pressing Daniel Jackson, a well-known volunteer, matters at once came to an ugly head. The day happened to be a field-day, and as Birchall crossed the market square to wait upon the magistrates at the City Hall, he was “given to understand what might be expected in the evening,” for one of the artillerymen, striking his piece, called out to his fellows: “Now for a running ball! There he goes!” with hissing, booing and execrations. At seven o’clock one of the gang rushed into the captain’s lodgings with disquieting news. The volunteers were attacking the rendezvous. He hurried out, but by the time he arrived on the scene the mischief was already done. The enraged volunteers, after first driving the gang into the City Hall, had torn down the rendezvous colours and staff, and broken open the city jail and rescued their comrade, whom they were then in the act of carrying shoulder-high through the streets, the centre of a howling mob that even the magistrates feared to face. By request Birchall and his gang returned to Liverpool, counting themselves lucky to have escaped the “running ball” they had been threatened with earlier in the day.¹

Another town that gave the gang a hot reception

¹ *Ad. I.* 1529—Capt. Birchall, 29 Dec. 1803.

was Whitby. As in the case of Chester the gang there was an importation, having been brought in from Tyneside by Lieuts. Atkinson and Oakes. As at Chester, too, a place of rendezvous had been procured with difficulty, for at first no landlord could be found courageous enough to let a house for so dangerous a purpose. At length, however, one Cooper was prevailed upon to take the risk, and the flag was hung out. This would seem to have been the only provocative act of which the gang was guilty. It sufficed. Anticipation did the rest; for just as in some individuals gratitude consists in a lively sense of favours to come, so the resentment of mobs sometimes avenges a wrong before it has been inflicted.

On Saturday the 23rd of February 1793, at the hour of half-past seven in the evening, a mob of a thousand persons, of whom many were women, suddenly appeared before the rendezvous. The first intimation of what was about to happen came in the shape of a furious volley of brickbats and stones, which instantly demolished every window in the house, to the utter consternation of its inmates. Worse, however, was in store for them. An attempt to rush the place was temporarily frustrated by the determined opposition of the gang, who, fearing that all in the house would be murdered, succeeded in holding the mob at bay for an hour and a half; but at nine o'clock, several of the gangsmen having been in the meantime struck down and incapacitated by stones, which were rained upon the devoted building without cessation, the door at length gave way before an onslaught with capstan-bars, and the mob swarmed in unchecked. A scene of in-

describable confusion and fury ensued. Savagely assaulted and mercilessly beaten, the gangsmen and the unfortunate landlord were thrown into the street more dead than alive, every article of furniture on the premises was reduced to fragments, and when the mob at length drew off, hoarsely jubilant over the destruction it had wrought, nothing remained of His Majesty's rendezvous save bare walls and gaping windows. Even these were more than the townsfolk could endure the sight of. Next evening they reappeared upon the scene, intending to finish what they had begun by pulling the house down or burning it to ashes; but the timely arrival of troops frustrating their design, they regretfully dispersed.¹

Out at sea the sailor, if he could not set the tune by running away from the gang, played up to it with great heartiness. To sink the press-boat was his first aim. With this end in view he held stolidly on his course, if under weigh, betraying his intention by no sign till the boat, manœuvring to get alongside of him, was in the right position for him to strike. Then, all of a sudden, he showed his hand. Clapping his helm hard over, he dexterously ran the boat down, leaving the struggling gangsmen to make what shift they could for their lives. Many a knight of the hanger was sent to Davy Jones in this summary fashion, unloved in life and cursèd in the article of death.

The attempt to best the gang by a master-stroke of this description was not, it need hardly be said, attended with uniform success. A miss of an inch or two, and the boat was safe astern, pulling like

¹ *Ad.* 1. 2739—Lieut. Atkinson, 26 Feb. and 27 June 1793.

mad to recover lost ground. In these circumstances the sailor recalled how he had once seen a block fall from aloft and smash a shipmate's head, and from this he argued that if a suitable object such as a heavy round-shot, or, better still, the ship's grindstone, were deftly dropped over the side at the psychological moment, it must either have a somewhat similar effect upon the gangsmen below or sink the boat by knocking a hole in her bottom. The case of the *John and Elizabeth* of Sunderland, that redoubtable Holland pink whose people were "resolved sooner to dye than to be impressed," affords an admirable example of the successful application of this theory.

As the *John and Elizabeth* was running into Sunderland harbour one afternoon in February 1742, three press-boats, hidden under cover of the pier-head, suddenly darted out as she surged past that point and attempted to board her. They met with a remarkable repulse. For ten minutes, according to the official account of the affair, the air was filled with grindstones, four-pound shot, iron crows, handspikes, capstan-bars, boat-hooks, billets of wood and imprecations, and when it cleared there was not in any of the boats a man who did not bear upon his person some bloody trace of that terrible fusillade. They sheered off, but in the excitement of the moment and the mortification of defeat Midshipmen Clapp and Danton drew their pistols and fired into the jeering crew ranged along the vessel's gunwhale, "not knowing," as they afterwards pleaded, "that there was any balls in the pistols." Evidence to the contrary was quickly forthcoming. A man fell dead

on the pink's deck, and before morning the two middies were safe under lock and key in that "dismal hole," Durham jail. It was a notable victory for the sailor and applied mechanics.¹

The affair of the *King William* Indiaman, a ship whose people kept the united boats'-crews of two men-of-war at bay for nearly twenty-four hours, carried the sailor's resistance to the press an appreciable step further and developed some surprising tactics. Between three and four o'clock in the afternoon of a day in September 1742, two ships came into the Downs in close order. They had been expected earlier in the day, and both the *Shrewsbury* frigate and the *Shark* sloop were on the lookout for them. A shot from the former brought the headmost to an anchor, but the second, the *King William*, hauled her wind and stood away close to the Goodwins, out of range of the frigate's guns. Here, the tide being spent and the wind veering ahead, she was obliged to anchor, and the warships' boats were at once manned and dispatched to press her men. Against this eventuality the latter appear to have been primed "with Dutch courage," as the saying went, the manner of which was to broach a cask of rum and drink your fill. On the approach of the press-boats pandemonium broke loose. The maddened crew, brandishing their cutlasses and shouting defiance, assailed the on-coming boats with every description of missile they could lay hands on, not excepting that most dangerous of all casual ammunition, broken bottles. The *Shrewsbury's* mate fell, seriously wounded, and finding themselves

¹ *Ad. 1.* 1439—Capt. Allen, 13 March 1741-2, and enclosure.

unable to face the terrible hail of missiles, the boats drew off. Night now came on, rendering further attempts temporarily impossible—a respite of which the Indiaman's crew availed themselves to confine the master and break open the arms-chest, which he had taken the precaution to nail down. With morning the boats returned to the attack. Three times they attempted to board, and as often were they repulsed by pistol and musketry fire. Upon this the *Shark*, acting under peremptory orders from the *Shrewsbury*, ran down to within half-gunshot of the Indiaman and fired a broadside into her, immediately afterwards repeating the dose on finding her still defiant. The ship then submitted and all her men were pressed save two. They had been killed by the *Shark's* gun-fire.¹

With the appearance of the gang on the deck of his ship there was ushered in the last stage but one of the sailor's resistance to the press afloat. How, when this happened, all hands were mustered and the protected sheep separated from the unprotected goats, has been fully described in a previous chapter. These preliminaries at an end, "Now, my lads," said the gang officer, addressing the pressable contingent in the terms of his instructions, "I must tell you that you are at liberty, if you so choose, to enter His Majesty's service as volunteers. If you come in in that way, you will each receive the bounty now being paid, together with two months' advance wages before you go to sea. But if you don't choose to enter voluntarily, then I must take you against your wills"

¹ *Ad. 1.* 1829—Capt. Goddard, 22 Sept. and 16 Oct., and his Deposition, 19 Oct. 1742.

It was a hard saying, and many an old shellback—ay! and young one too—spat viciously when he heard it. Conceive the situation! Here were these poor fellows returning from a voyage which perhaps had cut them off from home and kindred, from all the ordinary comforts and pleasures of life, for months or maybe years; here were they, with the familiar cliffs and downs under their hungry eyes, suddenly confronted with an alternative of the cruellest description, a Hobson's choice that left them no option but to submit or fight. It was a heartbreaking predicament for men, and more especially for sailor-men, to be placed in, and if they sometimes rose to the occasion like men and did their best to heave the gang bodily into the sea, or to drive them out of the ship with such weapons as their hard situation and the sailor's Providence threw in their way—if they did these things in the gang's despite, they must surely be judged as outraged husbands, fathers and lovers rather than as disloyal subjects of an exacting king. They would have made but sorry man-o'-war's-men had they entertained the gang in any other way.

Opposed to the service cutlass, the sailor's emergency weapon was but a poor tool to stake his liberty upon, and even though the numerical odds chanced to be in his favour he often learnt, in the course of his pitched battles with the gang, that the edge of a hanger is sharper than the corresponding part of a handspike. Lucky for him if, with his shipmates, he could then retreat to close quarters below or between decks, there to make a final stand for his brief spell of liberty ashore. This was his last ditch. Beyond it lay only surrender or death.

The death of the sailor at the hands of the gang introduces us to a phase of pressing technically known as the accidental, wherein the accidents were of three kinds—casual, unavoidable, and “disagreeable.”

The casual accident was one that could be neither foreseen nor averted, as when Capt. Argles, returning to England on the breaking up of the Limerick rendezvous in 1814, was captured by an American privateer “well up the Bristol Channel,” a place where no one ever dreamed of falling in with such an enemy.¹

To the unavoidable accident every impress officer and agent was liable in the execution of his duty. It could thus be foreseen in the abstract, though not in the instance. Hence it could not be avoided. Wounds given and received in the heat and turmoil of pressing came under this head, provided they did not prove fatal.

The accident “disagreeable” was peculiar to pressing. It consisted in the killing of a man, by whatever means and in whatever manner, whilst endeavouring to press him, and the immediate effect of the act, which was common enough, was to set up a remarkable contradiction in terms. The man killed was not the victim of the accident. The victim was the officer or gangster who was responsible for striking him off the roll of His Majesty’s pressable subjects, and who thus let himself in for the consequences, more or less disagreeable, which inevitably followed.

While it was naturally the ambition of every

¹ *Ad. I.* 1455—Capt. Argles, 17 Aug. 1814.

officer engaged in pressing "to do the business without any disagreeable accident ensuing," he preferred, did fate ordain it otherwise, that the accident should happen at sea rather than on land, since it was on land that the most disagreeable consequences accrued to the unfortunate victim. These embraced flight and prolonged expatriation, or, in the alternative, arrest, preliminary detention in one of His Majesty's prisons, and subsequent trial at the Assizes. What the ultimate punishment might be was a minor, though still ponderable consideration, since, where naval officers or agents were concerned, the law was singularly capricious.¹ At sea, on the other hand, the conditions which on land rendered accidents of this nature so uniformly disagreeable, were almost entirely reversed. How and why this was so can be best explained by stating a case.

The accident in point occurred in the year 1755, and is associated with the illustrious name of Rodney. The Seven Years War was at the time looming in the near future, and England's secret complicity in the causes of that tremendous struggle rendered necessary the placing of her Navy upon a footing adequate to the demands which it was foreseen would be very shortly made upon it. In common with a hundred other naval officers, Rodney, who was then in command of the *Prince George* guardship at Portsmouth, had orders to proceed without loss of time to the raising of men. One of his lieutenants was accordingly sent to London, that happy hunting-ground

¹ As in Lacie's case, 25 Elizabeth, where a mortal wound having been inflicted at sea, whereof the party died on land, the prisoner was acquitted because neither the Admiralty nor a jury could inquire of it.

of the impress officer, while two others, with picked crews at their backs, were put in charge of tenders to intercept homeward-bounds. This was near the end of May.

On the 1st of June, in the early morning, one of these tenders—the *Princess Augusta*, Lieut. Sax commander—fell in, off Portland Bill, with the *Britannia*, a Leghorn trader of considerable force. In response to a shot fired as an intimation that she was expected to lay-to and receive a gang on board, the master, hailing, desired permission to retain his crew intact till he should have passed that dangerous piece of navigation known as the Race. To this reasonable request Sax acceded and the ship held on her course, closely followed by the tender. By the time the Race was passed, however, the merchantman's crew had come to a resolution. They should not be pressed by "such a pimping vessel" as the *Princess Augusta*. Accordingly, they first deprived the master of the command, and then, when again hailed by the tender, "swore they would lose their lives sooner than bring too." The Channel at this time swarmed with tenders, and to Sax's hint that they might just as well give in then and there as be pressed later on, they replied with defiant huzzas and the discharge of one of their maindeck guns. The tender was immediately laid alongside, but on the gang's attempting to board they encountered a resistance so fierce that Sax, thinking to bring the infuriated crew to their senses, ordered his people to fire upon them. Ralph Sturdy and John Debusk, armed with harpoons, and John Wilson, who had requisitioned the cook's spit as a weapon, fell dead before

that volley. The rest, submitting without further ado, were at once confined below.

Now, three questions of moment are raised by this accident: What became of the ship? what was done with the dead men? and what punishment was meted out to the lieutenant and his gang?

The crew once secured under hatches, the safety of the ship became of course the first consideration. It was assured by a simple expedient. The gang remained on board and worked the vessel into Portsmouth harbour, where, after her hands had been taken out—Rodney the receiver—"men in lieu" were put on board, as explained in our chapter on pressing afloat, and with this make-shift crew she was navigated to her destination, in this instance the port of London.

As persons killed at sea, the three sailors who lay dead on the ship's deck did not come within the jurisdiction of the coroner. That official's cognisance of such matters extended only to high-water mark when the tide was at flood, or to low-water mark when it was at ebb. Beyond those limits, seawards, all acts of violence done in great ships, and resulting in mayhem or the death of a man, fell within the sole purview and jurisdiction of the Station Admiral, who on this occasion happened to be Sir Edward Hawke, commander of the White Squadron at Portsmouth. Now Sir Edward was not less keenly alive to the importance of keeping such cases hidden from the public eye than were the Lords Commissioners. Hence he immediately gave orders that the bodies of the dead men should be taken "without St. Helens" and there committed to the deep. Instead of going to feed the Navy, the three sailors thus went

to feed the fishes, and another stain on the service was washed out with a commendable absence of publicity and fuss.

There still remained the lieutenant and his gang to be dealt with and brought to what, by another singular perversion of terms, was called justice. On shore, notwithstanding the lenient view taken of such accidents, an indictment of manslaughter, if not of murder, would have assuredly followed the offence; and though in the circumstances it is doubtful whether any jury would have found the culprits guilty of the capital crime, yet the alternative verdict, with its consequent imprisonment and disgrace, held out anything but a rosy prospect to the young officer who had still his second "swab" to win. That was where the advantage of accidents at sea came in. On shore the judiciary, however kindly disposed to the naval service, were painfully disinterested. At sea the scales of justice were held, none too meticulously, by brother officers who had the service at heart. Under the judicious direction of Admiral Osborn, who in the meantime had succeeded Sir Edward Hawke in the Portsmouth command, Lieut. Sax and his gang were consequently called upon to face no ordeal more terrible than an "inquiry into their proceedings and behaviour." Needless to say, they were unanimously exonerated, the court holding that the discharge of their duty fully justified them in the discharge of their muskets.¹ When such disagreeable accidents had to

¹ *Ad. 1.* 5925—Minutes at a Court-Martial held on board H.M.S. *Prince George* at Portsmouth, 14 Nov. 1755. Precedent for the procedure in this case is found in *Ad. 7.* 298—Law Officers' Opinions, 1733-56, No. 27.

be investigated, the disagreeable business was done—to purloin an apt phrase of Coke's—"without prying into them with eagles' eyes."

But it is time to leave the trail of blood and turn to a more agreeable phase of pressing.

CHAPTER IX

THE GANG AT PLAY

THE reasons assigned for the pressing of men who ought never to have made the acquaintance of the warrant or the hanger were often as far-fetched as they are amusing. "You have no right to press a person of my distinction!" warmly protested an individual of the superior type when pounced upon by the gang. "Lor love yer! that's the wery reason we're a-pressin' of your worship," replied the grinning minions of the service. "We've such a set of blackguards aboard the tender yonder, we wants a toff like you to learn 'em manners."

The quixotic idea of inculcating manners by means of the press infected others besides the gangster. In a Navy whose officers not only plumed themselves on representing the *ne plus ultra* of etiquette, but demanded that all who approached them should do so without sin either of omission or commission, the idea was universal. Pride of service and pride of self entered into its composition in about equal proportions; hence the sailing-master who neglected to salute the flag, or who through ignorance, crass stupidity, or malice aforethought flew prohibited colours, was no more liable to be taught an exemplary lesson than the bum-boatman who sauced

the officer of the watch when detected in the act of smuggling spirits or women into one of His Majesty's ships.

For all such offenders the autocracy of the quarter-deck, from the rigid commander down to the very young gentleman newly joined, kept a jealous lookout, and many are the instances of punishment, swift and implacable, following the offence. Insulted dignity could of course take it out of the disrespectful foremastman with the rattan, the cat or the irons; but for the ill-mannered outsider, whether pertaining to sea or land, the recognised corrective was His Majesty's press. A solitary exception is found in the case of Henry Crabb of Chatham, a boatman who rejoiced in incurable lameness; rejoiced because, although there were many cripples on board the Queen's ships in his day, his infirmity was such as to leave him at liberty to ply for hire "when other men durst not for feare of being Imprest." He was an impudent, over-reaching knave, and Capt. Balchen, of the *Adventure* man-o'-war, whose wife had suffered much from the fellow's abusive tongue and extortionate propensities, finding himself unable to press him, brought him to the capstan and there gave him "eleven lashes with a Catt of Nine Tailles."¹

A letter written in the early forties—a letter as breezy as the sea from which it was penned—gives us a striking picture of the old-time naval officer as a teacher of deportment. Cruising far down-Channel, Capt. Brett, of the *Anglesea* man-o'-war, there fell in with a ship whose character puzzled him sorely. He consequently gave chase, but the wind falling light

¹ *Ad.* 1. 1466—Capt. Balchen, 10 March 1703-4.

and night coming on, he lost her. Early next morning, as luck would have it, he picked her up again, and having now a "pretty breeze," he succeeded in drawing within range of her about two o'clock in the afternoon, when he fired a shot to bring her to. The strange sail doubtless feared that she was about to lose her hands, for instead of obeying the summons she trained her stern-chasers on the *Anglesea* and for an hour and a half blazed away at her as fast as she could load. "They put a large marlinespike into one of their guns," the indignant captain tells us, "which struck the carriage of the chase gun upon our forecastle, dented it near two inches, then broke asunder and wounded one of the men in the leg, and had it come a yard higher, must infallibly have killed two or three. By all this behaviour I concluded she must be an English vessel taken by the Spaniards. However, when we came within a cable's length of him he brought to, so we run close under his stern in order to shoot a little berth to leeward of him, and at the same time bid them hoist their boats out. Our people, as is customary upon such occasions, were then all up upon the gunhill and in the shrouds, looking at him. Just as we came under his quarter he pointed a gun that was sticking out a little abaft his main-shrouds right at us, and put the match to it, but it happened very luckily that the gun blew. A fellow that was standing on the quarter-deck then took up a blunderbuss and presented it, which by its not going off must have missed fire. As it was almost impossible, they being stripp'd and bareheaded, besides having their faces besmeared with powder, for us to judge them by their looks, I concluded they must be

a Parcell of Light-headed Frenchmen run mad, and thinking it by no means prudent to let them kill my men in such a ridiculous manner, I ordered the marines, who were standing upon the quarter-deck with their musquets shoulder'd, to fire upon them. As soon as they saw the musquets presented they fell flat upon the decks and by that means saved themselves from being kill'd. Some of our people at the same time fired a 9-pounder right into his quarter, upon which they immediately submitted. I own I never was more surprised in all my life to find that she was an English vessel, tho' my surprise was lessened a good deal when I came to see the master and all his fighting men so drunk as to be scarce capable of giving a rational answer to any question that was asked them. I was very glad to find that none of them were hurt; *but I found out the man who presented the blunderbuss, and upon his behaving saucily when I taxed him with it, I took him out of the vessel.*"¹

So abhorrent a condiment was "sauce" to the naval palate, whether of officer or impress agent, that its use invariably brought its own punishment with it. "You are no gentleman!" said Gangsman Dibell to one Hartnell, a currier who accidentally jostled him whilst he was drinking in a Poole taproom. "No, nor you neither!" replied Hartnell. The retort cost him a most disagreeable experience. Dibell and his comrades collared him and dragged

¹ *Ad. I.* 1479—Capt. Brett, 17 April 1743. The captain's use of gender is philologically instructive. Not till later times, it seems, did ships lose the character of a "strong man armed" and take on, uniformly, the attributes of the skittish female.

him off to the rendezvous, where he was locked up in the black-hole till the next day.¹

At Waterford Capt. Price went one better than this, for a man who was totally unfit for the service having one day shown him some trifling disrespect, the choleric old martinet promptly set the gang upon him and had him conveyed on board the tender, "where," says Lieut. Collingwood, writing a month later, "he has been eating the king's victuals ever since."² Punishment enough, surely!

One night at Londonderry, as Lieut. Watson was making his way down to the quay for the purpose of boarding the *Hope* tender, of which he was commander, he accidentally ran against a couple of strangers.

"Hallo! my lads," cried he, "who and what are you?"

"I am what I am," replied one of them, insolently.

The lieutenant, who had been dining, fired up at this and demanded to know if language such as that was proper to be addressed to a king's officer.

"As you please," said he of the insolent tongue. "If you like it better, I'll say I'm a piece of a man."

"So I see by your want of manners," retorted the lieutenant. "Come along with me, my brave piece! I know those who will make a whole man of you before they're done."

With that he seized the fellow, meaning to take him to his boat, which lay near by, but the pressed man, watching his chance, tripped him up and made

¹ *Ad.* I. 580—Inquiry into the Conduct of the Impress Officers at Poole, 13 Aug. 1804.

² *Ad.* I. 1501—Lieut. Collingwood, 18 March 1781.

off. Next day there was a sequel. The lieutenant "was taken possession of by the Civil Power" on a charge of assault.¹

Another officer who met with base ingratitude from a pressed man whose manners he attempted to reform was Capt. Bethel of the *Phoenix*. At the Nore he was once grossly abused by the crew of a Customs-House boat, and in retaliation took one of their number and carried him to sea. Peremptory orders reaching him at one of the Scottish ports, however, he discharged the man and paid his passage south. He was immediately sued for false imprisonment and cast in heavy damages.²

Capt. Brereton, of the *Falmouth*, was "had" in similar fashion by the master of an East-Indiaman whom he pressed at Manilla because of his insolence, and who afterwards, by a successful suit at law, let him in for £400 damages and costs.³

This was turning the tables of etiquette on its professors with a vengeance.

Such costly lessons in the art of politeness, however, did not in the least abash the naval officer or deter him from the continued inculcation of manners. Young fellows idly roystering on the river could not be permitted to miscall with impunity the gorgeous admiral passing in his twelve-oared barge,⁴ nor irate shipmasters who flouted the impress service of the Crown as a "pitiful" thing and its officers as "little scandalous creatures," be allowed to go scot-free.⁵

¹ *Ad.* i. 1531—Lieut. Watson, 27 Oct. 1804.

² *Ad.* i. 1493—Capt. Bethel, 29 Aug. 1762.

³ *Ad.* i. 1494—Capt. Brereton, 18 Oct. 1765.

⁴ *Ad.* i. 577—Admiral the Marquis of Carmarthen, 24 June 1710.

⁵ *Ad.* i. 2379—Capt. Robinson, 21 Feb. 1725-6.

At whatever cost, the dignity of the service must be maintained.

Nowhere did the use of invective attain such extraordinary perfection as amongst those who plied their vocations on the country's busy waterways. Here "sauce" was reduced to a science and vituperation to a fine art. Thames watermen and Tyne keelmen in particular acquired an astounding proficiency in the choice and application of abusive epithets, but of the two the keelman carried off the palm. The wherryman, it is true, possessed a ripe vocabulary, but the fact that it embraced only a single dialect seriously handicapped him in his race with the keelman, who had no less than three to draw upon, all equally prolific. Between "keelish," "coblish" and "sheelish," the respective dialects of the north-country keelman, pilot and tradesman, he had at his command a source of supply unrivalled in vituperative richness, abundance and variety. With these at his tongue's end none could touch, much less outdo him in power and scope of abusive description. He became in consequence of these superior advantages so "insupportably impudent" that the only known cure for his complaint was to follow the prescription of Capt. Atkins of the *Panther*, and "take him as fast as you could ketch him";¹ but even this drastic method of curbing his tongue was robbed of much of its efficacy by the jealous care with which he was "protected."

Failure to amain, that is, to douse your topsail or dip your colours when you meet with a ship of war—the marine equivalent for raising one's hat—con-

¹ *Ad.* I. 1438—Capt. Atkins, 23 Dec. 1720.

stituted a gross contempt of the king's service. The custom was very ancient, King John having instituted it in the second year of his reign. At that time, and indeed for long after, the salute was obligatory, its omission entailing heavy penalties;¹ but with the advent of the century of pressing another means of inspiring respect for the flag, now exacted as a courtesy rather than a right, came into vogue. The offending vessel paid for its omission in men.

If you were anything but a king's ship, and flew a flag that only king's ships were entitled to fly, you were guilty, in the eyes of every right-seeing naval officer, of another piece of ill manners so gross as to be deserving of the severest punishment the press was capable of inflicting upon you. You might fly the "flag and Jack white, with a red cross (commonly called St. George's cross) passing quite through the same"; likewise the "ensign red, with the cross in a canton of white at the upper corner thereof, next to the staff"; but if you presumed to display His Majesty's Jack, commonly called the Union Jack, or any other of the various flags of command flown by ships of war or vessels employed in the naval service, swift retribution overtook you. Similarly, the inadvertent hoisting of your colours "wrong end uppermost," or in any other manner deemed inconsistent with the dignity of the service which permitted you to fly them, laid you open to reprisals of the most

¹ A copy of the original proclamation may be seen in Lansdowne MSS., clxxi, f. 218, where it is also summarised in the following terms: "*Anno 2 regni Johannis regis: Friends not amaining at the j sumons but resisting the King his lieutenant, the L. Admirall or his lieutenant, to lose the ship and goods, & their bodies to be imprisoned.*"

summary nature. Before you realised the heinousness of your offence, a gang boarded you and your best man or men were gone beyond recall. The joy of waterside weddings—occasions prolific in the display of wrong colours—was often turned into sorrow in this way.

Inability to do the things you professed to do involved grave risk of making intimate acquaintance with the gang. If, for example, you were a skipper and navigated your vessel more like a 'prentice than a master hand, some one belonging to you was bound, in waters swarming with ships of war, to pay the piper sooner or later. "A few days ago," writes Capt. Archer of the *Isis*, "a ship called the *Jane*, Stewart master, ran on board of us in a most lubberly manner—for which, as is customary on such occasions, I took four of his people."¹

Ability to handle a musical instrument sometimes proved as fatal to one's liberty as inability to handle a ship. Queen Anne was directly responsible for this. Almost immediately after her accession she signed a warrant authorising the pressing of "drummers, fife and haut boys for sea and land."² Though the authorisation was only temporary, the practice thus set up continued long after its origin had been relegated to the scrap-heap of memory, and not only continued, but was interpreted in a sense much broader than its royal originator ever intended it should be. This tendency to take an ell in lieu of the stipulated inch was illustrated as early as 1705, when Lieut. Thomson, belonging to the *Lichfield*, chancing to

¹ *Ad. I.* 1448—Capt. Archer, 17 May 1795.

² *Home Office Military Entry Books*, clxviii, f. 406.

meet one Richard Bullard, fiddler, "persuaded him to go as far as Woolwich with him, to play a tune or two to him and some friends who had a mind to dance, saying he would pay him for it"—which he did, when tired of dancing, by handing him over to the press-gang.¹

In 1781, again, a "stout lad of 17" was pressed at Waterford because, as a piper, he was considered likely to be "useful in amusing the new-raised men";² and as late as 1807 a gang at Portsmouth, acting under orders from Capt. Sir Robert Bromley, took one Madden, a blind man, because of his "qualification of playing on the Irish bagpipes." His affliction saved him. He was discharged, and the amount of his pay and victualling was deducted from Sir Robert's wages as a caution to him to be more careful in future.³

Perhaps the oddest reasons ever adduced in justification of specific acts of pressing were those put forward in the cases of James Baily, a Gosport ferryman who was pressed on account of his "great inactivity," and of John Conyear, exempt passenger on the packet-boat plying between Dartmouth and Poole, subjected to the same process because, as the officer responsible ingenuously put it when called to book for the act, if Conyear had not been on board, "another would, who might have been a proper person to serve His Majesty."⁴

An ironical interest attaches to the pressing of

¹ *Ad. I.* 1467—Capt. Byron, 13 July 1705.

² *Ad. I.* 1501—Lieut. Collingwood, 18 March 1781.

³ *Ad. I.* 1544—Capt. Sir Robert Bromley, 2 Dec. 1808.

⁴ *Ad. I.* 1451—Capt. Argles, 4 May 1807; *Ad. I.* 2485—Capt. Scott, 13 March 1780.

John Hagin, a youth of nineteen who cherished an ambition to go a-whaling. Tramping the riverside at Hull one day in search of a ship, he accidentally met one of the lieutenants employed in the local impress service, and mistaking him for the master of a Greenland ship, stepped up to him and asked him for a berth. "Berth?" said the obliging officer. "Come this way;" and he conducted the unsuspecting youth to the rendezvous.¹

Before you took a voyage for the benefit of your health in those days it was always advisable to satisfy yourself as to the nature of the cargo the vessel carried or intended to carry, otherwise you were liable to be let in for a longer voyage than health demanded. Richard Gooding of Bawdsey, in the county of Suffolk, a twenty-one-year-old yeoman who knew nothing of the iniquities practised in ships, in an evil hour acted on the advice of his apothecary and ran across to Holland for the sake of his health, which the infirmities of youth appear to have undermined. All went well until, on the return trip, just before Bawdsey Ferry hove in sight, down swooped a revenue cutter's boat with an urgent request that the master should open up his hatches and disclose what his hold contained. He demurred, alleging that it held nothing of interest to revenue men; but on their going below to see for themselves they discovered an appreciable quantity of gin. Thereupon the master wickedly declared Gooding to be the culprit, and he was pressed on suspicion of attempting to run a cargo of spirits.²

Into the operations of the gang this element of

¹ *Ad. I.* 1455—Capt. Ackton, 23 March 1814.

² *Ad. I.* 1530—Capt. Broughton, 20 April 1803, and enclosure.

suspicion entered very largely, especially in the pressing of supposed sailors. To carry about on your person any of the well-known marks of the seafaring man was to invite certain disaster. When pressed, like so many others, because he was "in appearance very much like a sailor," John Teede protested vehemently that he had never been to sea in his life, and that all who said he had were unmitigated liars. "Strip him," said the officer, who had a short way with such cases. In a twinkling Teede's shirt was over his head and the sailor stood revealed. Devices emblematic of love and the sea covered both arms from shoulder to wrist. "You and I will lovers die, eh?" said the officer, with a twinkle, as he spelt out one of the amatory inscriptions. "Just so, John! I'll see to that. Next man!"¹

Bow-legged men ran the gravest of risks in this respect, and the goose of many a tailor was effectually cooked because of the damning fact, which no protestations of innocence of the sea could mitigate, that long confinement to the board had warped his legs into a fatal resemblance to those of a typical Jack-tar. Harwich once had a mayor who, after vowing that he would "never be guilty of saying there was no law for pressing sailors," as a convincing proof that he knew what was what, and was willing to provide it to the best of his ability, straightway sent out and pressed—a tailor!²

The itinerant Jewish peddler who hawked his wares about the country suffered grievously on this

¹ *Ad.* 1. 1522—Description of a Person calling himself John Teede, 28 Dec. 1799.

² *Ad.* 1. 1436—Capt. Allen, 26 March 1706.

account. However indisputably Hebraic his name, his accent and his nose might be, those evidences of nationality were Anglicised, so to speak, by the fact that his legs were the legs of a sailor, and the bandy appendages so characteristic of his race sooner or later brought the gang down upon him in full cry and landed him in the fleet.

In the year 1780 the fishing town of Cromer was thrown into a state of acute excitement by the behaviour of a casual stranger—a great, bearded man of foreign aspect who, taking a lodging in the place, resorted daily to the beach, where he walked the sands “at low water mark,” now writing with great assiduity in a book, again gesticulating wildly to the sea and the cliffs, whence the suspicious townsfolk, then all unused to “visitors” and their eccentricities, watched his antics in wonder and consternation. The principal inhabitants of the place, alarmed by his vagaries, constituted themselves a committee of safety, and with the parson at their head went down to interview him; and when, in response to their none too polite inquiries, he flatly refused to give any account of himself, they by common consent voted him a spy and a public menace, telling each other that he was undoubtedly engaged in drawing plans of the coast in order to facilitate the landing of some enemy; for did not the legend run:—

“He who would Old England win,
Must at Weybourn Hope begin?”

and was not the “Hoop,” as it was called locally, only a few miles to the northward? No time was to be lost. Post-haste they dispatched a messenger to

Lieut. Brace at Yarmouth, begging him, if he would save his country from imminent danger, to lose not a moment in sending his gang to seize the suspect and nip his fell design in the bud. With this alarming request Brace promptly complied, and the stranger was dragged away to Yarmouth. Arraigned before the mayor, he with difficulty succeeded in convincing that functionary that he was nothing more dangerous than a stray agriculturist whom the Empress Catherine had sent over from Russia to study the English method of growing—turnips!¹

The unhandsome treatment meted out to the inoffensive Russian is of a piece with the whole aspect of pressing by instigation, of which it is at once a specimen and a phase. The incentive here was suspicion; but in the fertile field of instigation motives flourished in forms as varied as the weaknesses of human nature.

Thomas Onions, respectable burgess of Bridgnorth, engaged in working a trow from that place to Bristol, fell under suspicion owing to the mysterious disappearance of a portion of the cargo, which consisted of china. The rest of the crew being metaphorically as well as literally in the same boat, the consignee's agent, on the trow's arrival at Bristol, hinted at a more than alliterative connection between china and chests, which he was proceeding to search when Onions objected, very rightly urging that he had no warrant. "Is it a warrant you're wanting?" demanded the baffled agent. "Very well, we'll see if we cannot find one." With that he stepped ashore and hurried to the rendezvous, where he knew the officers,

¹ *State Papers, Russia*, cv.—Lieut. Brace, 18 Aug. 1780.

and within the hour the gang added Onions to the impress stock-pot.¹

Much the same motive led to the pressing of Charles M'Donald, a north-country youth of education and property. His mother wished him to enter the army, but his guardians, piqued by her insistence, "had him kidnapped on board the impress tender at Shields, under pretence of sending him on a visit."²

An "independent fortune of fourteen hundred pounds," bequeathed to him by his "Aunt Elizabeth," was instrumental in launching John Stillwell of Clerkenwell upon a similar career. His step-mother and uncle desired to retain possession of the money, of which they were trustees; so they suborned the gang and the young man disappeared.³

A more legitimate pastime of the gang was the pressing of incorrigible sons. George Clark of Birmingham and William Barnicle of Margate, the one a notorious thief, the other the despair of his family because of his drunken habits, were two out of many shipped abroad by this cheap but effectual means, the instigator of the gang being in each case the lad's own father.⁴ The distracting problem, "What to do with our sons?" was in this way amazingly simplified.

In thus utilising the gang as a means of retaliating upon those who incurred their displeasure, both naval officers and private individuals, had they been arraigned

¹ *Ad.* 1. 1542—Memorial of the Inhabitants and Burgesses of Bridgnorth, 12 March 1808.

² *Ad.* 1. 1537—Capt. Bland, 29 Nov. 1806, and enclosure.

³ *Ad.* 1. 1539—Capt. Burton, 25 April 1806, and enclosure.

⁴ *Ad.* 1. 1537—Jeremiah Clark, 30 July 1806; *Ad.* 1. 1547—Lieut. Dawe, 4 Sept. 1809.

for the offence, could have pleaded in justification of their conduct the example of no less exalted a body than the Admiralty itself. The case of the bachelor seamen of Dover, pressed because of an official animus against that town, was as notorious as their Lordships' futile attempt to teach the Brighton fishermen respect for their betters, or their later orders to Capt. Culverhouse, of the Liverpool rendezvous, instructing him "to take all opportunities of impressing seafaring men belonging to the Isle of Man," as a punishment for the "extreme ill-conduct of the people of that Island to His Majesty's Officers on the Impress Service."¹ The Admiralty method of paying out anyone against whom you cherished a grudge possessed advantages which strongly commended it to the splenetic and the vindictive. For suppose you lay in wait for your enemy and beat or otherwise maltreated him: the chances were that he would either punish you himself or invoke the law to do it for him; while if you removed him by means of the garrot, the knife or the poisoned glass, no matter how discreetly the deed was done the hangman was pretty sure to get you sooner or later. But the gang—it was as safe as an epidemic! The fact was not lost upon the community. People in almost every station of life appreciated it at its true worth, and, encouraged by the example of the Admiralty, availed themselves of the gang as the handiest, speediest and safest of mediums for wiping out old scores.

On shipboard, where life was more cramped and men consequently came into sharper contact than on shore, resentments were struck from daily inter-

¹ *Ad.* 3. 148—Admiralty Minutes, 11 Oct. 1803.

course like sparks from steel. Like sparks some died, impotent to harm their object; but others, cherished in bitterness of spirit through many a lonely watch, flashed into malicious action with that hoped-for opportunity, the coming of the gang. John Gray, carpenter of a merchant ship, in a moment of anger threatened to cut the skipper down with an axe. This happened under a West-Indian sun. Months afterwards, as the ship swung lazily into Bristol river and the gang came aboard, the skipper found his opportunity. Beckoning to the impress officer, he pointed to John Gray and said: "Take that man!"¹ Gray never again lifted an axe on board a merchant vessel.

Certain amenities which once passed between the master and the mate of the *Lady Shore* serve to throw an even broader light upon the origin of quarrels at sea and the methods of settling them then in vogue. The *Lady Shore* was on the passage home from Quebec when the master one day gave certain sailing directions which the mate, who was a sober, careful seaman, thought fit to disregard on the ground that the safety of the ship would be endangered if he followed them. The master, an irascible, drunken brute, at this flew into a passion and sought to ingraft his ideas of seamanship upon the mate through the medium of a handspike, with which he caught him a savage blow "just above the eye, cutting him about three inches in length." It was in mid-ocean that this lesson in navigation was administered. By the time Scilly shoved its nose above the horizon the skipper's "down" on the mate had reached an

¹ *Ad. I.* 1542—Capt. Barker, 22 June 1808, and enclosure.

acute stage. His resentment of the latter's being the better seaman had now deepened into hatred, and to this, as the voyage neared its end, was added growing fear of prosecution. At this juncture a man-o'-war hove in sight and signalled an inspection of hands. "Get your chest on deck, Mr. Mate," cried the exultant skipper. "You are too much master here. It is time for us to part." Taken out of the ship as a pressed man, the mate was ultimately discharged by order of the Admiralty; but the skipper had his revenge.¹

A riot that occurred at King's Lynn in the year '55 affords a striking instance of the retaliatory use of the gang on shore. In the course of the disturbance mud and stones were thrown at the magistrates, who had come out to do what they could to quell it. Angered by so gross an indignity, they supplied the gang with information that led to the pressing of some sixty persons concerned in the tumult, but as these consisted mainly of "vagrants, gipsies, parish charges, maimed, halt and idiots," the magisterial resentment caused greater rejoicings at Lynn than it did at Spithead, where the sweepings of the borough were eventually deposited.²

There is a decided smack of the modern about the use the gang was put to by the journeymen coopers of Bristol. Considering themselves underpaid, they threatened to go on strike unless the masters raised their wages. In this they were not entirely unanimous, however. One of their number stood out, refusing to join the combine; whereupon the rest summoned the

¹ *Ad.* 1. 583—Matthew Gill to Admiral Moorsom, 15 Jan. 1813.

² *Ad.* 1. 920—Admiral Sir Edward Hawke, 8 June 1755.

gang and had the "blackleg" pressed for his contumacy.¹

In pressing William Taylor of Broadstairs the gang nipped in the bud as tender a romance as ever flourished in the shelter of the Kentish cliffs, which is saying not a little. Taylor was only a poor fisherman, and when he dared to make love to the pretty daughter of the Ramsgate Harbour-Master, that exalted individual, who entertained for the girl social ambitions in which fishermen's shacks had no place, resented his advances as insufferable impertinence. A word to Lieut. Leary, his friend at the local rendezvous, did the rest. Taylor disappeared, and though he was afterwards discharged from His Majesty's ship *Utrecht* on the score of his holding a Sea-Fencible's ticket, the remedy had worked its cure and the Harbour-Master was thenceforth free to marry his daughter where he would.²

So natural is the transition from love to hate that no apology is needed for introducing here the story of Sam Burrows, the ex-beadle of Chester who fell a victim to the harsher in much the same manner as Taylor did to the gentler passion. Burrows' evil genius was one Rev. Lucius Carey, an Irish clergyman—whether Anglican or Roman we know not, nor does it matter—who had contracted the unclerical habit of carrying pistols and too much liquor. In this condition he was found late one night knocking in a very violent manner at the door of the "Pied Bull," and swearing that, while none should keep him out, any who refused to assist him in breaking in should

¹ *Ad. I.* 1542—Capt. Barker, 20 Aug. 1808, and enclosure.

² *Ad. I.* 1450—Capt. Austen, 23 Sept. 1803.

be shot down forthwith. Burrows, the ex-beadle, happened to be passing at the moment. He seized the drunken cleric and with the assistance of James Howell, one of the city watchmen, forcibly removed him to the watch-house, whence he was next day taken before the mayor and bound over to appear at the Sessions. Now it happened that certain members of the local press-gang were Carey's boon companions, so no sooner did he leave the presence of the mayor than he looked them up. That same evening Burrows was missing. Carey had found him a "hard bed," otherwise a berth on board a man-o'-war.¹

In the columns of the *Westminster Journal*, under date of 10th May 1743, we read of a sailor who, dying at Ringsend, was brought to Irishtown church-yard, near Dublin, for burial. "When they laid him on the ground," the narrative continues, "the coffin was observed to stir, on which he was taken up, and by giving him some nourishment he came to himself, and is likely to do well." Whether this sailor was ever pressed, either before or after his abortive decease, we are not informed; but there is on record at least one well-authenticated instance of that calamity overtaking a person who had passed the bourne whence none is supposed to return.

In the year 1723 a young lad whose name has not been preserved, but who was at the time apprentice to a master sailmaker in London, set out from that city to visit his people, living at Sandwich. He appears to have travelled afoot, for, getting a "lift" on the road, he was carried into Deal, where

¹ *Ad. I.* 1532—Capt Birchall, 17 July 1804, and enclosures.

he arrived late at night, and having no money was glad to share a bed with a seafaring man, the boatswain of an Indiaman then in the Downs. From this circumstance sprang the events which here follow.

Along in the small hours of the night the lad awoke, and finding the room stuffy and day on the point of breaking, he rose and dressed, purposing to see the town in the cool of the morning. The catch of the door, however, refused to yield under his hand, and while he was endeavouring to undo it the noise he made awakened the boatswain, who told him that if he looked in his breeches pocket he would find a knife there with which he could lift the latch. Acting on this hint, the lad succeeded in opening the door, and thereupon went downstairs in accordance with his original intention. When he returned some half-hour later, as he did for the purpose of restoring the knife, which he had thoughtlessly slipped into his pocket, the bed was empty and the boatswain gone. Of this he thought nothing. The boatswain had talked, he remembered, of going off to his ship at an early hour, in order, as he had said, to call the hands for the washing down of the decks. The lad accordingly left the house and went his way to Sandwich, where, as already stated, his people lived.

Meantime the old inn at Deal, and indeed the whole town, was thrown into a state of violent commotion by a most shocking discovery. Going about their morning duties at the inn, the maids had come to the bed in which the boatswain and the apprentice had slept, and to their horror found it saturated with blood. Drops of blood, together with marks of blood-stained hands and feet, were further discovered

on the floor and the door of the chamber, down the stairs, and along the passage leading to the street, whence they could be distinctly traced to the water-side, not so very far away. Imagination, working upon these ghastly survivals of the hours of darkness, quickly reconstructed the crime which it was evident had been committed. The boatswain was known to have had money on him ; but the youth, it was recalled, had begged his bed. It was therefore plain to the meanest understanding that the youth had murdered the boatswain for his money and thrown the body into the sea.

At once that terrible precursor of judgment to come, the hue and cry was raised, and that night the footsore apprentice lay in Sandwich jail, a more than suspected felon, for his speedy capture had supplied what was taken to be conclusive evidence of his guilt. In his pocket they discovered the boatswain's knife, and both it and the lad's clothing were stained with blood. Asked whose blood it was, and how it came there, he made no answer. Asked was it the boatswain's knife, he answered, "Yes, it was," and therewith held his peace. In face of such evidence, and such an admission, he stood prejudged. His trial at the Assizes was a mere formality. The jury quickly found him guilty, and sentence of death was passed upon him.

The day of execution came. Up to this point Fate had set her face steadfastly against our apprentice lad ; but now, in the very hour and article of death, she suddenly relented and smiled upon him. The dislocating "drop" was in those days unknown. When you were hanged, you were hanged from a

cart, which was suddenly whisked from under you, leaving you dangling in mid-air like a kind of death-fruit nearly, but not quite, ready to fall. Much depended on the executioner, and that grim functionary was in this case a raw hand, unused to his work, who bungled the job. The knot was ill-adjusted, the rope too long, the convict tall and lank. This last circumstance was no fault of the executioner's, but it helped. When they turned him off, the lad's feet swept the ground, and his friends, gathering round him like guardian angels, bore him up. Cut down at the end of a tense half-hour, he was hurried away to a surgeon's and there copiously bled. And being young and virile, he revived.

Trudging to Portsmouth some little time after, with the intention of for ever leaving a country to which he was legally dead, he fell in with one of the numerous press-gangs frequenting that road, and was sent on board a man-o'-war. There, in course of time, he rose to be master's mate, and in that capacity, whilst on the West-India station, was transferred to another ship. On this ship he met the surprise of his life—if life can be said to hold further surprises for one who has died and lived again. As he stepped on deck the first person he met was his old bed-fellow, the boatswain.

The explanation of the amazing series of events which led up to this amazing meeting is very simple. On the evening of that fateful night at Deal the boatswain, who had been ailing, was let blood. In his sleep the bandage slipped and the wound reopened. Discovering his condition when awakened by the apprentice, he rose and left the house, intending to

have the wound re-dressed by the barber-surgeon who had inflicted it, with more effect than discretion, some hours earlier. At the very door of the inn, however, he ran into the arms of a press-gang, by whom he was instantly seized and hurried on board ship.¹

¹ Watts, *Remarkable Events in the History of Man*, 1825.

CHAPTER X

WOMEN AND THE PRESS-GANG

THE medieval writer who declared women to be "capable of disturbing the air and exciting tempests" was not indulging a mere quip at the expense of that limited storm area, his own domestic circle. He expressed what in his day, and indeed for long after, was a cardinal article of belief—that if you were so ill-advised as to take a woman to sea, she would surely upset the weather and play the mischief with the ship.

To this ungallant superstition none subscribed more heartily than the sailor, though always, be it understood, with a mental reservation. Unlike many landsmen who held a similar belief, he limited the malign influence of the sex strictly to the high-seas, where, for that reason, he vastly preferred woman's room to her company; but once he was safe in port, woman in his opinion ceased to be dangerous, and he then vastly preferred her company to her room.

For her companionship he had neither far to seek nor long to wait. It was a case of

"Deal, Dover and Harwich,
The devil gave his daughter in marriage."

All naval seaports were full of women, and to prevent the supply from running short thoughtful parish officials—church-wardens and other well-meaning but

sadly misguided people—added constantly to the number by consigning to such doubtful reformatories the undesirable females of their respective petty jurisdictions. The practice of admitting women on board the ships of the fleet, too—a practice as old as the Navy itself—though always forbidden, was universally connived at and tacitly sanctioned. Before the anchor of the returning man-of-war was let go a flotilla of boats surrounded her, deeply laden with pitiful creatures ready to sell themselves for a song and the chance of robbing their sailor lovers. No sooner did the boats lay alongside than the last vestige of Jack's superstitious dread of the malevolent sex went by the board, and discipline with it. Like monkeys the sailors swarmed into the boats, where each selected a mate, redeemed her from the grasping boatman's hands with money or blows according to the state of his finances or temper, and so brought his prize, save the mark! in triumph to the gangway. It was a point of honour, not to say of policy, with these poor creatures to supply their respective "husbands," as they termed them, with a drop of good-cheer; so at the gangway they were searched for concealed liquor. This was the only formality observed on such occasions, and as it was enforced in the most perfunctory manner imaginable, there was always plenty of drink going. Decency there was none. The couples passed below and the hell of the besotted broke loose between decks, where the orgies indulged in would have beggared the pen of a Balzac.¹

During the earlier decades of the century these conditions, monstrous though they were, passed

¹ Statement of Certain Immoral Practices, 1822.



ANNE MILLS.
Who served on board the *Maidstone* in 1740.

almost unchallenged, but as time wore on and their pernicious effects upon the *morale* of the fleet became more and more appalling, the service produced men who contended strenuously, and in the end successfully, with a custom that, to say the least of it, did violence to every notion of decency and clean living. In 1746 the ship's company of the *Sunderland* complained bitterly because not even their wives were "suffer'd to come aboard to see them."¹ It was a sign of the times. By the year '78 the practice had been fined down to a point where, if a wherry with a woman in it were seen hovering in a suspicious manner about a ship of war, the boatman was immediately pressed and the woman turned on shore.² Another twenty years, and the example of such men as Jervis, Nelson and Collingwood laid the evil for good and all. The seamen of the fleet themselves pronounced its requiescat when, drawing up certain "Rules and Orders" for their own guidance during the mutiny of '97, they ordained that "no woman shall be permitted to go on shore from any ship, but as many come in as pleases."³

An unforeseen consequence of thus suppressing the sailor's impromptu liaisons was an alarming increase in the number of desertions. On shore love laughs at locksmiths; on shipboard it derided the boatswain's mate. To run and get caught meant at the worst "only a whipping bout," and, the sailor's hide being as tough as his heart was tender, he ran

¹ *Ad.* I. 1482—Capt. Brett, 22 Feb. 1745-6.

² *Ad.* I. 1498—Capt. Boteler, 18 April 1778.

³ *Ad.* I. 5125—A Detail of the Proceedings on Board the *Queen Charlotte* in the Year 1797.

and took the consequences with all a sailor's stoicism. In this respect he was perhaps not singular. The woman in the case so often counts for more than the punishment she brings.

Few of those who deserted their ships for amatory reasons had the luck—viewing the escapade from the sailor's standpoint—that attended the schoolmaster of the *Princess Louisa*. Going ashore at Plymouth to fetch his chest from the London wagon, he succumbed to the blandishments of an itinerant fiddler's wife, whom he chanced to meet in the husband's temporary absence, and was in consequence "no more heard of."¹

Had it always been a case of the travelling woman, the sailor's flight in response to the voice of the charmer would seldom have landed him in the cells or exposed his back to the caress of the ship's cat. Where he was handicapped in his love flights was this. The haunt or home of his seducer was generally known to one or other of his officers, and when this was not the case there were often other women who gladly gave him away. "Captain Barrington, Sir," writes "Nancy of Deptford" to the commander of a man-o'-war in the Thames, "there is a Desarter of yours at the upper water Gate. Lives at the sine of the mantion house. He is an Irishman, gose by the name of Youe (Hugh) MackMullins, and is trying to Ruing a Wido and three Children, for he has Insenuated into the Old Woman's faver so far that she must Sartingly come to poverty, and you by Sarching the Cook's will find what I have related to be true and much oblidge the hole parrish of St. Pickles Deptford."²

¹ *Ad.* I. 1478—Capt. Boys, 5 April 1742.

² *Ad.* I. 1495—Capt. Barrington, 22 Oct. 1771, enclosure.

A favourite resort of the amatory tar was that extra-parochial spot known as the Liberty of the Fleet, where the nuptial knot could be tied without the irksome formalities of banns or licence. The fact strongly commended it to the sailor and brought him to the precinct in great numbers.

"I remember once on a time," says Keith, the notorious Fleet parson, "I was at a public-house at Ratcliffe, which was then full of Sailors and their Girls. There was fiddling, piping, jigging and eating. At length one of the Tars starts up and says: 'Damn ye, Jack! I'll be married just now; I will have my partner.' The joke took, and in less than two hours Ten Couples set out for the Flete. They returned in Coaches, five Women in each Coach; the Tars, some running before, some riding on the Coach Box, and others behind. The Cavalcade being over, the Couples went up into an upper Room, where they concluded the evening with great Jollity. The landlord said it was a common thing, when a Fleet comes in, to have 2 or 3 Hundred Marriages in a week's time among the Sailors."¹

In the "Press-Gang, or Love in Low Life," a play produced at Covent Garden Theatre in 1755, Trueblue is pressed, not in, but out of the arms of his tearful Nancy. The situation is distressingly typical. The sailor's happiness was the gangster's opportunity, however Nancy might suffer in consequence.

For the average gangster was as void of sentiment as an Admiralty warrant, pressing you with

¹ Keith, *Observations on the Act for Preventing Clandestine Marriages*, 1753.

equal avidity and absence of feeling whether he caught you returning from a festival or a funeral. To this callosity of nature it was due that William Castle, a foreign denizen of Bristol who had the hardihood to incur the marital tie there, was called upon, as related elsewhere, to serve at sea in the very heyday of his honeymoon. Similarly, if four seamen belonging to the *Dundee* Greenland whaler had not stolen ashore one night at Shields "to see some women," they would probably have gone down to their graves, seawards or landwards, under the pleasing illusion that the ganger was a man of like indulgent passions with themselves. The negation of love, as exemplified in that unsentimental individual, was thus brought home to many a seafaring man, long debarred from the society of the gentler sex, with startling abruptness and force.

The pitiful case of the "Maidens Pressed," whose names are enrolled in the pages of Camden Hotten,¹ is in no way connected with pressing for naval purposes. Those unfortunates were not victims of the gangster's notorious hardness of heart, but of their own misdeeds. Like the female disciples of the "diving hand" stated by Lutterell² to have been "sent away to follow the army," they were one and all criminals of the Moll Flanders type who "left their country for their country's good" under compulsion that differed widely, both in form and purpose, from that described in these pages.

To assert, however, that women were never

¹ Hotten, List of Persons of Quality, etc., who Went from England to the American Plantations.

² Lutterell, Historical Relation of State Affairs, 12 March 1706.

pressed, in the enigmatic sense of their being taken by the gang for the manning of the fleet, would be to do violence to the truth as we find it in naval and other records. As a matter of fact, the direct contrary was the case, and there were in the kingdom few gangs of which, at one time or another in their career, it could not be said, as Southey said of the gang at Bristol, that "they pressed a woman."

The incident alluded to will be familiar to all who know the poet as distinguished from the Bard of Avon. It is found in the second "English Eclogue," under the caption of the "Grandmother's Tale," and has to do with the escapade, long famous in the more humorous annals of Southey's native city, of blear-eyed Moll, a collier's wife, a great, ugly creature whose voice was as gruff as a mastiff's bark, and who wore habitually a man's hat and coat, so that at a few yards' distance you were at a loss to know whether she was man or woman.

"There was a merry story told of her,
How when the press-gang came to take her husband
As they were both in bed, she heard them coming,
Drest John up in her nightcap, and herself
Put on his clothes and went before the captain."

A case of pressing on all-fours with this is said to have once occurred at Portsmouth. A number of sailors, alarmed by the rumoured approach of a gang while they were a-fairing, took it into their heads, so the story goes, to effect a partial exchange of clothing with their sweethearts, in the hope that the hasty shifting of garments would deceive the gang and so protect them from the press. It did. In their parti-garb make-up the women looked more sailorly than

the sailors themselves. The gang consequently pressed them, and there were hilarious scenes at the rendezvous when the fair recruits were "regulated" and the ludicrous mistake brought to light.

It was not only on shore, however, or on special occasions such as this, that women played the sailor. A naval commander, accounting to the Admiralty for his shortness of complement, attributes it mainly to sickness, partly to desertion, and incidentally to the discharge of one of the ship's company, "who was discovered to be a woman."¹

His experience is capped by that of the master of the *Edmund and Mary*, a vessel engaged in carrying coals to Ipswich. Shrewdly suspecting one of his apprentices, a clever, active lad, to be other than what he seemed, he taxed him with the deception. Taken unawares, the lad burst into womanly tears and confessed himself to be the runaway daughter of a north-country widow. Disgrace had driven her to sea.²

These instances are far from being unique, for both in the navy and the mercantile marine the masquerading of women in male attire was a not uncommon occurrence. The incentives to the adoption of a mode of life so foreign to all the gentler traditions of the sex were various, though not inadequate to so surprising a change. Amongst them unhappiness at home, blighted virtue, the secret love of a sailor and an abnormal craving for adventure and the romantic life were perhaps the most common and the most powerful. The question of clothing pre-

¹ *Ad.* 1. 1503—Capt. Burney, 15 Feb. 1782.

² *Naval Chronicle*, vol. xxx. 1813, p. 184.

sented little difficulty. Sailors' slops could be procured almost anywhere, and no questions asked. The effectual concealment of sex was not so easy, and when we consider the necessarily intimate relations subsisting between the members of a ship's crew, the narrowness of their environment, the danger of unconscious betrayal and the risks of accidental discovery, the wonder is that any woman, however masculine in appearance or skilled in the arts of deception, could ever have played so unnatural a part for any length of time without detection. The secret of her success perhaps lay mainly in two assisting circumstances. In theory there were no women at sea, and despite his occasional vices the sailor was of all men the most unsophisticated and simple-minded.

Conspicuous among women who threw the dust of successful deception in the eyes of masters and ship-mates is Mary Anne Talbot. Taking to the sea as a girl in order to "follow the fortunes" of a young naval officer for whom she had conceived a violent but unrequited affection, she was known afloat as John Taylor. In stature tall, angular and singularly lacking in the physical graces so characteristic of the average woman, she passed for years as a true shellback, her sex unsuspected and unquestioned. Accident at length revealed her secret. Wounded in an engagement, she was admitted to hospital in consequence of a shattered knee, and under the operating knife the identity of John Taylor merged into that of Mary Anne Talbot.¹

It is said, perhaps none too kindly or truthfully,

¹ *Times*, 4 Nov. 1799.

that the lady doctor of the present day no sooner sets up in practice than she incontinently marries the medical man around the corner, and in many instances the sailor-girl of former days brought her career on the ocean wave to an equally romantic conclusion. However skilled in the art of navigation she might become, she experienced a constitutional difficulty in steering clear of matrimony. Maybe she steered for it.

A romance of this description that occasioned no little stir in its day is associated with a name at one time famous in the West-India trade. Through bankruptcy the name suffered eclipse, and the unfortunate possessor of it retired to a remote neighbourhood, taking with him his two daughters, his sole remaining family. There he presently sank under his misfortunes. Left alone in the world, with scarce a penny-piece to call their own, the daughters resolved on a daring departure from the conventional paths of poverty.

Making their way to Portsmouth, they there dressed themselves as sailors and in that capacity entered on board a man-o'-war bound for the West Indies. At the first reduction of Curaçoa, in 1798, as in subsequent naval engagements, both acquitted themselves like men. No suspicion of the part they were playing, and playing with such success, appears to have been aroused till a year or two later, when one of them, in a brush with the enemy, was wounded in the side. The surgeon's report terminated her career as a seaman.

Meanwhile the other sister contracted tropical fever, and whilst lying ill was visited by one of the



MARY ANNE TALLOT.



junior officers of the ship. Believing herself to be dying, she told him her secret, doubtless with a view to averting its discovery after death. He confessed that the news was no surprise to him. In fact, not only had he suspected her sex, he had so far persuaded himself of the truth of his suspicions as to fall in love with one of his own crew. The tonic effect of such avowals is well known. The fever-stricken patient recovered, and on the return of the ship to home waters the officer in question made his late foremast hand his wife.¹

Of all the veracious yarns that are told of girl-sailors, there is perhaps none more remarkable than the story of Rebecca Anne Johnson, the girl-sailor of Whitby. One night a hundred and some odd years ago a Mrs. Lesley, who kept the "Bull" inn in Half-moon Alley, Bishopsgate Street, found at her door a handsome sailor-lad begging for food. He had eaten nothing for four and twenty hours, he declared, and when plied with supper and questions by the kind-hearted but inquisitive old lady, he explained that he was an apprentice to the sea, and had run from his ship at Woolwich because of the mate's unduly basting him with a rope's-end. "What! you a 'prentice?" cried the landlady; and turning his face to the light, she subjected him to a scrutiny that read him through and through.

Next day, at his own request, he was taken before the Lord Mayor, to whom he told his story. That he was a girl he freely admitted, and he accounted for his appearing in sailor rig by asserting that a brutal father had apprenticed him to the sea in his thirteenth

¹ *Naval Chronicle*, vol. viii. 1802, p. 60.

year. More astounding still, the same unnatural parent had actually bound her, the sailor-girl's, mother, apprentice to the sea, and in that capacity she was not only pressed into the navy, but killed at the battle of Copenhagen, up to which time, though she had followed the sea for many years and borne this child in the meantime, her sex had never once been called in question.¹

While woman was thus invading man's province at sea, that universal feeder of the Navy, the press-gang, made little or no appeal to her as a sphere of activity. On Portland Island, it is true, Lieut. M'Key, who commanded both the Sea-Fencibles and the press-gang there, rated his daughter as a midshipman;² but with this exception no woman is known to have added the hanger to her adornment. The three merry maids of Taunton, who as gangsmen put the Denny Bowl quarrymen to rout, were of course impostors.

But if the ganger's life was not for woman, there was ample compensation for its loss in the wider activities the gang opened up for her. The gangsmen was nothing if not practical. He took the poetic dictum that "men must work and women must weep"—a conception in his opinion too sentimentally one-sided to be tolerated as one of the eternal verities of human existence—and improved upon it. By virtue of the rough-and-ready authority vested in him he abolished the distinction between toil and tears, decreeing instead that women should suffer both.

¹ *Naval Chronicle*, vol. xx. 1808, p. 293.

² *Ad.* I. 581—Admiral Berkeley, Report on Rendezvous, 15 April 1806.

"M'Gugan's wife?" growled Capt. Brenton, gang-master at Greenock, when the corporation of that town ventured to point out to him that M'Gugan's wife and children must inevitably come to want unless their bread-winner, recently pressed, were forthwith restored to them,—"*M'Gugan's wife is as able to get her bread as any woman in the town!*"¹

For two hundred and fifty years, off and on—ever since, in fact, the press-masters of bluff King Hal denuded the Dorset coast of fishermen and drove the starving women of that region to sea in quest of food²—the press-gang had been laboriously teaching English housewives this very lesson, the simple economic truth that if they wanted bread for themselves and their families while their husbands were fagging for their country at sea, they must turn to and work for it. Yet in face of this fact here was M'Gugan's wife trying to shirk the common lot. It was monstrous!

M'Gugan's wife ought really to have known better. The simplest calculation, had she cared to make it, would have shown her the utter futility of hoping to live on the munificent wage which a grateful country allowed to M'Gugan, less certain deductions for M'Gugan's slops and contingent sick-benefit, in return for his aid in protecting it from its enemies; and almost any parish official could have told her, what she ought in reason to have known already, that she was no longer merely M'Gugan's wife, dependent upon his exertions for the bread she ate, but a

¹ *Ad.* I. 1511—Capt. Brenton, 15 Jan. 1795.

² *State Papers Domestic, Henry VIII.*: Lord Russell to the Privy Council, 22 Aug. 1545.

Daughter of the State and own sister to thousands of women to whom the gang in its passage brought toil and poverty, tears and shame—not, mark you, the shame of labour, if there be such a thing, but the bedraggled, gin-sodden shame of the street, or, in the scarce less dreadful alternative, the shame of the goodwife of the ballad who lamented her husband's absence because, worse luck, sundry of her bairns “were gotten quhan he was awa’.”

Lamentable as this state of things undoubtedly was, it was nevertheless one of the inevitables of pressing. You could not take forcibly one hundred husbands and fathers out of a community of five hundred souls, and pay that hundred husbands and fathers the barest pittance instead of a living wage, without condemning one hundred wives and mothers to hard labour on behalf of the three hundred children who hungered. Out of this hundred wives and mothers a certain percentage, again, lacked the ability to work, while a certain other percentage lacked the will. These recruited the ranks of the outcast, or with their families burdened the parish.¹ The direct social and economic outcome of this mode of manning the Navy, coupled with the payment of a starvation wage, was thus threefold. It reversed the natural sex-incidence of labour; it fostered vice; it bred paupers. The first was a calamity personal to those who suffered it. The other two were national in their calamitous effects.

In that great diurnal of the eighteenth-century

¹ *Ad.* 1. 5125—Memorial of the Churchwardens and Overseers of the Poor of the Parish of Portsmouth, 3 Dec 1793, and numerous instances.

navy, the Captains' Letters and Admirals' Dispatches, no volume can be opened without striking the broad trail of destitution, misery and heart-break, to mention no worse consequences, left by the gang. At nearly every turn of the page, indeed, we come upon recitals or petitions recalling vividly the exclamation involuntarily let fall by Pepys the tender-hearted when, standing over against the Tower late one summer's night, he watched by moonlight the pressed men sent away : " Lord ! how some poor women did cry."

A hundred years later and their heritors in sorrow are crying still. Now it is a bed-ridden mother bewailing her only son, " the principal prop and stay of her old age " ; again a wife, left destitute " with three hopeful babes, and pregnant." And here, bringing up the rear of the sad procession—lending to it, moreover, a touch of humour in itself not far removed from tears—comes Lachlan M'Quarry. The gang have him, and amid the Stirling hills, where he was late an indweller, a motley gathering of kinsfolk mourn his loss—" me, his wife, two Small helpless Children, an Aged Mother who is Blind, an Aged Man who is lame and unfit for work, his father in Law, and a sister Insane, with his Mother in Law who is Infirm." ¹ The fact is attested by the minister and elders of the parish, being otherwise unbelievable ; and Lachlan is doubtless proportionately grieved to find himself at sea. Men whose wives " divorced " them through the medium of the gang—a not uncommon practice—experienced a similar grief.

Besides the regular employment it so generously

¹ *Ad.* 1. 1454—The Humble Petition of Jullions Thomson, Spouse to Lachlan M'Quarry, 2 May 1812,

provided for wives bereft of their lawful support, the press-gang found for the women of the land many an odd job that bore no direct relation to the earning of their bread. When the mob demolished the Whitby rendezvous in '93, it was the industrious fishwives of the town who collected the stones used as ammunition on that occasion ; and when, again, Lieut. M'Kenzie unwisely impressed an able seaman in the house of Joseph Hook, inn-keeper at Pill, it was none other than "Mrs. Hook, her daughter and female servant" who fell upon him and tore his uniform in shreds, thus facilitating the pressed man's escape "through a back way."¹

The good people of Sunderland at one time indulged themselves in the use of a peculiar catch-phrase. Whenever any feat of more than ordinary daring came under their observation, they spoke of it as "a case of Dryden's sister." The saying originated in this way. The Sunderland gang pressed the mate of a vessel, one Michael Dryden, and confined him in the tender's hold. One night Dryden's sister, having in vain bribed the lieutenant in command to let him go, at the risk of her life smuggled some carpenter's tools on board under the very muzzles of the sentinel's muskets, and with these her brother and fifteen other men cut their way to freedom.²

A tender lying in King Road, at the entrance to Bristol River, was the scene of another episode of the "Dryden's sister" type. Going ashore one morning, the lieutenant in command fell from the bank and broke his sword. It was an ill omen, for in his

¹ *Ad.* I. 1534—Lieut. M'Kenzie, 20 Oct. 1805.

² *Ad.* I. 2740—Lieut. Atkinson, 24 June and 10 July 1798.

absence the hard fate of the twenty pressed men who lay in the tender's hold, "all handcuff to each other," made an irresistible appeal to two women, pressed men's wives, who had been with singular lack of caution admitted on board. Whilst the younger and prettier of the two cajoled the sentinel from his post, the elder and uglier secured an axe and a hatchet and passed them unobserved through the scuttle to the prisoners below, who on their part made such good use of them that when at length the lieutenant returned he found the cage empty and the birds flown. The shackles strewing the press-room bore eloquent testimony to the manner of their flight. The irons had been hacked asunder, some of them with as many as "six or seven Cutts."¹

Never, surely, did the gang provide an odder job for any woman than the one it threw in the way of Richard Parker's wife. The story of his part in the historic mutiny at the Nore is common knowledge. Her's, being less familiar, will bear retelling. But first certain incidents in the life of the man himself, some of them hitherto unknown, call for brief narration.

Born at Exeter in or about the year 1764, it is not till some nineteen years later, or, to be precise, the 5th of May 1783, that Richard Parker makes his debut in naval records. On that date he appears on board the *Mediator* tender at Plymouth, in the capacity of a pressed man.²

The tender carried him to London, where in due

¹ *Ad. I.* 1490—Capt. Brown, 12 May 1759.

² *Ad. Ships' Musters*, I. 9307—Muster Book of H.M. Tender the *Mediator*.

course he was delivered up to the regulating officers, and by them turned over to the *Ganges*, Captain the Honourable James Lutterell. This was prior to the 30th of June 1783, the date of his official "appearance" on board that ship. On the *Ganges* he served as a midshipman—a noteworthy fact¹—till the 4th of September following, when he was discharged to the *Bull-Dog* sloop by order of Admiral Montagu.²

His transfer from the *Bull-Dog* banished him from the quarter-deck and sowed within him the seeds of that discontent which fourteen years later made of him, as he himself expressed it, "a scape-goat for the sins of many."³ He was now, for what reason we do not learn, rated as an ordinary seaman, and in that capacity he served till the 15th of June 1784, when he was discharged sick to Haslar Hospital.⁴

At this point we lose track of him for a matter of

¹ Though one of rare occurrence, Parker's case was not altogether unique; for now and then a pressed man by some lucky chance "got his foot on the ladder," as Nelson put it, and succeeded in bettering himself. Admiral Sir David Mitchell, pressed as the master of a merchantman, is a notable example. Admiral Campbell, "Hawke's right hand at Quiberon," who entered the service as a substitute for a pressed man, is another; and James Clephen, pressed as a sea-going apprentice, became master's-mate of the *Doris*, and taking part in the cutting out of the *Chevette*, a corvette of twenty guns, from Cameret Bay, in 1801, was for his gallantry on that occasion made a lieutenant, fought at Trafalgar and died a captain. On the other hand, John Norris, pressed at Gallions Reach out of a collier and "ordered to walk the quarter-deck as a midshipman," proved such a "laisie, sculking, idle fellow," and so "filled the sloop and men with vermin," that his promoter had serious thoughts of "turning him ashore."—*Ad.* 1. 1477—Capt. Bruce, undated letter, 1741.

² *Ad.* Ships' Musters, 1. 10614—Muster Book of H.M.S. *Ganges*.

³ *Ad.* 1. 5339—Dying Declaration of the Late Unfortunate Richard Parker, 28 June 1797.

⁴ *Ad.* Ships' Musters, 1. 10420, 10421—Muster Books of H.M. Sloop *Bull-Dog*.

nearly fourteen years, but on the 31st of March 1797, the year which brought his period of service to so tragic a conclusion, he suddenly reappears at the Leith rendezvous as a Quota Man for the county of Perth. Questioned as to his past, he told Brenton, then in charge of that rendezvous, "that he had been a petty officer or acting lieutenant on board the *Mediator*, Capt. James Lutterell, at the taking of five prizes in 1783, when he received a very large proportion of prize-money."¹ The inaccuracies evident on the face of this statement are unquestionably due to Brenton's defective recollection rather than to Parker's untruthfulness. Brenton wrote his report nearly two and a half months after the event.

After a period of detention on board the tender at Leith, Parker, in company with other Quota and pressed men, was conveyed to the Nore in one of the revenue vessels occasionally utilised for that purpose, and there put on board the *Sandwich*, the flag-ship for that division of the fleet. At half-past nine on the morning of the 12th of May, upon the 2nd lieutenant's giving orders to "clear hawse," the ship's company got on the booms and gave three cheers, which were at once answered from the *Director*. They then reeved yard-ropes as a menace to those of the crew who would not join them, and trained the fore-castle guns on the quarter-deck as a hint to the officers. The latter were presently put on shore, and that same day the mutineers unanimously chose Parker to be their "President" or leader.² The fact

¹ *Ad. I.* 1517—Capt. Brenton, 10 June 1797.

² *Ad. I.* 5339—Court-Martial on Richard Parker: Deposition of Lieut. Justice.

that he had been pressed in the first instance, and that after having served for a time in the capacity of a "quarter-deck young gentleman" he had been unceremoniously derated, singled him out for this distinction. There was amongst the mutineers, moreover, no other so eligible; for whatever Parker's faults, he was unquestionably a man of superior ability and far from inferior attainments.

The reeving of yard-ropes was his idea, though he disclaimed it. An extraordinary mixture of tenderness and savagery, he wept when it was proposed to fire upon a runaway ship, the *Repulse*, but the next moment drove a crowbar into the muzzle of the already heavily shotted gun and bade the gunner "send her to hell where she belonged." "I'll make a beefsteak of you at the yard-arm" was his favourite threat.¹ It was prophetic, for that way, as events quickly proved, lay the finish of his own career.

At nine o'clock on the morning of the 30th of June Parker, convicted and sentenced to death after a fair trial, stood on the scaffold awaiting his now imminent end. The halter, greased to facilitate his passing, was already about his neck, and in one of his hands, which had been freed at his own request, he held a handkerchief borrowed for the occasion from one of the officers of the ship. This he suddenly dropped. It was the preconcerted signal, and as the fatal gun boomed out in response to it he

¹ *Ad. 1. 5339*—Court-Martial on Richard Parker: Depositions of Capt. John Wood, of H.M. Sloop *Hound*, William Livingston, boatswain of the *Director*, and Thomas Barry, seaman on board the *Monmouth*.

thrust his hands into his pockets with great rapidity and jumped into mid-air, meeting his death without a tremor and with scarce a convulsion. Thanks to the clearness of the atmosphere and the facility with which the semaphores did their work that morning, the Admiralty learnt the news within seven minutes.¹

Now comes the woman's part in the drama on which the curtain rose with the pressing of Parker in '83, and fell, not with his execution at the yard-arm of the *Sandwich*, as one would suppose, but four days after that event.

In one of his spells of idleness ashore Parker had married a Scotch girl, the daughter of an Aberdeenshire farmer—a tragic figure of a woman whose fate it was to be always too late. Hearing that her husband had taken the bounty, she set out with all speed for Leith, only to learn, upon her arrival there, that he was already on his way to the fleet. At Leith she tarried till rumours of his pending trial reached the north country. The magistrates would then have put her under arrest, designing to examine her, but the Admiralty, to whom Brenton reported their intention, vetoed the proceeding as superfluous. The case against Parker was already complete.² Left free to follow the dictates of her tortured heart, the distracted woman posted south.

Eating his last breakfast in the gun-room of the *Sandwich*, Parker talked affectionately of his wife, saying that he had made his will and left her a small estate he was heir to. Little did he dream that she was then within a few miles of him.

¹ Trial and Life of Richard Parker, Manchester, 1797.

² *Ad. I.* 1517—Capt. Brenton, 15 June 1797, and endorsement.

The *Sandwich* lay that morning above Blackstakes, the headmost ship of the fleet, and at the moment when Parker leapt from her cathead scaffold a boat containing his wife shot out into the stream. He was run up to the yard-arm before her very eyes. She was again too late.

He hung there for an hour. Meantime, with a tenacity of purpose as touching as her devotion, the unhappy woman applied to the Admiral for the body of her husband. She was denied, and Parker's remains were committed to the new naval burial ground, beyond the Red-Barrier Gate leading to Minster. The burial took place at noon. By night-fall the grief-stricken woman had come to an amazing resolution. *She would steal the body.*

Ten o'clock that night found her at the place of interment. Save for the presence of the sentinel at the adjoining Barrier Gate, the loneliness of the spot favoured her design, but a ten-foot palisade surrounded the grounds, and she had neither tools nor helpers. Unexpectedly three women came that way. To them she disclosed her purpose, praying them for the love of God to help her. Perhaps they were sailors' wives. Anyhow, they assented, and the four body-snatchers scaled the fence.

The absence of tools, as it happened, presented no serious impediment to the execution of their design. The grave was a shallow one, the freshly turned mould loose and friable. Digging with their hands, they soon uncovered the coffin, which they then contrived to raise and hoist over the cemetery gates into the roadway, where they sat upon it to conceal it from chance passers-by till four o'clock in



MARY ANNE TALBOT.
Dressed as a sailor,

the morning. It was then daylight. The neighbouring drawbridge was let down, and, a fish-cart opportunely passing on its way to Rochester, the driver was prevailed upon to carry the "lady's box" into that town. A guinea served to allay his suspicions.

Three days later a caravan drew up before the "Hoop and Horseshoe" tavern, in Queen Street, Little Tower Hill. A woman alighted—furtively, for it was now broad daylight, whereas she had planned to arrive while it was still dark. A watchman chanced to pass at the moment, and the woman's strange behaviour aroused his suspicions. Pulling aside the covering of the van, he looked in and saw there the rough coffin containing the body of Parker, which the driver of the caravan had carried up from Rochester for the sum of six guineas. Later in the day the magistrates sitting at Lambeth Street Police Court ordered its removal, and it was deposited in the vaults of Whitechapel church.¹

Full confirmation of this extraordinary story, should any doubt it, may be found in the registers of the church in question. Amongst the burials there we read this entry: "*4 July, 1797, Richard Parker, Sheerness, Kent, age 33. Cause of death, execution. This was Parker, the President of the Mutinous Delegates on board the fleet at the Nore. He was hanged on board H.M.S. Sandwich on the 30th day of June.*"²

¹ Trial and Life of Richard Parker, Manchester, 1797.

² Burial Registers of St. Mary Matfellow, Whitechapel, 1797.

CHAPTER XI

IN THE CLUTCH OF THE GANG

ONCE the gang had a man in its power, his immediate destination was either the rendezvous press-room or the tender employed as a substitute for that indispensable place of detention.

The press-room, lock-up or "shut-up house," as it was variously termed, must not be confounded with the press-room at Newgate, where persons indicted for felony, and perversely refusing to plead, were pressed beneath weights till they complied with that necessary legal formality. From that historic cell the rendezvous press-room differed widely, both in nature and in use. Here the pressed men were confined pending their dispatch to His Majesty's ships. As a matter of course the place was strongly built, heavily barred and massively bolted, being in these respects merely a commonplace replica of the average bridewell. Where it differed from the bridewell was in its walls. Theoretically these were elastic. No matter how many they held, there was always room within them for more. As late as 1806 the press-room at Bristol consisted of a cell only eight feet square, and into this confined space sixteen men were frequently packed.¹

¹ *Ad. I.* 581—Admiral Berkeley, Report on Rendezvous, 14 March 1806.

Nearly everywhere it was the same gruesome story. The sufferings of the pressed man went for nothing so long as the pressed man was kept. Provided only the bars were dependable and the bolts staunch, anything would do to "clap him up in." The town "cage" came in handy for the purpose; and when no other means of securing him could be found, he was thrust into the local prison like a common felon, often amidst surroundings unspeakably awful.

According to the elder Wesley, no "seat of woe" on this side of the Bottomless Pit outrivalled Newgate except one.¹ The exception was Bristol jail. A filthy, evil-smelling hole, crowded with distempered prisoners without medical care, it was deservedly held in such dread as to "make all seamen fly the river" for fear of being pressed and committed to it. For when the eight-foot cell at the rendezvous would hold no more, Bristol pressed men were turned in here—to come out, if they survived the pestilential atmosphere of the place, either fever-stricken or pitiful, vermin-covered objects from whom even the hardened gangster shrank with fear and loathing.² Putting humane considerations entirely aside, it is well-nigh inconceivable that so costly an asset as the pressed man should ever have been exposed to such sanitary risks. The explanation doubtless lies in the enormous amount of pressing that was done. The number of men taken was in the aggregate so great that a life more or less was hardly worth considering.

Of ancient use as a county jail, Gloucester Castle stood far higher in the pressed man's esteem

¹ *London Chronicle*, 6 Jan. 1761.

² *Ad. I.* 1490—Capt. Brown, 4 Aug. 1759.

as a place of detention than did its sister prison on the Avon. The reason is noteworthy. Richard Evans, for many years keeper there, possessed a magic palm. Rub it with silver in sufficient quantity, and the "street door of the gaol" opened before you at noonday, or, when at night all was as quite as the keeper's conscience, a plank vanished from the roof of your cell, and as you stood lost in wonder at its disappearance there came snaking down through the hole thus providentially formed a rope by the aid of which, if you were a sailor or possessed of a sailor's agility and daring, it was feasible to make your escape over the ramparts of the castle, though they towered "most as high as the Monument."¹

In the absence of the gang on road or other extraneous duty the precautions taken for the safety of pressed men were often very inadequate, and this circumstance gave rise to many an impromptu rescue. Sometimes the local constable was commandeered as a temporary guard, and a story is told of how, the gang having once locked three pressed men into the cage at Isleworth and stationed the borough watchman over them, one Thomas Purser raised a mob, demolished the door of the cage, and set its delighted occupants free amid frenzied shouts of: "Pay away within, my lads! and we'll pay away without. Damn the constable! He has no warrant."²

In strict accordance with the regulations governing, or supposed to govern, the keeping of rendezvous, the duration of the pressed man's confinement ought never to have exceeded four-and-twenty hours from

¹ *Ad.* 1. 1490—Capt. Brown, 28 April and 26 May 1759.

² *Ad.* 7. 298—Law Officers' Opinions, 1733-56, No. 99.

the time of his capture ; but as a matter of fact it often extended far beyond that limit. Everything depended on the gang. If men were brought in quickly, they were as quickly got rid of ; but when they dribbled in in one's and two's, with perhaps intervals of days when nothing at all was doing, weeks sometimes elapsed before a batch of suitable size could be made ready and started on its journey to the ships.

All this time the pressed man had to be fed, or, as they said in the service, subsisted or victualled, and for this purpose a sum varying from sixpence to ninepence a day, according to the cost of provisions, was allowed him. On this generous basis he was nourished for a hundred years or more, till one day early in the nineteenth century some half-score of gaunt, hungry wretches, cooped up for eight weary weeks in an East-coast press-room during the rigours of a severe winter, made the startling discovery that the time-honoured allowance was insufficient to keep soul and body together. They accordingly addressed a petition to the Admiralty, setting forth the cause and nature of their sufferings, and asking for a "rise." A dozen years earlier the petition would have been tossed aside as insolent and unworthy of consideration ; but the sharp lesson of the Nore mutiny happened to be still fresh in their Lordships' memories, so with unprecedented generosity and haste they at once augmented the allowance, and that too for the whole kingdom, to fifteen-pence a day.¹

It was a red-letter day for the pressed man. A

¹ *Ad. I.* 1546—Petition of the Pressed Men at King's Lynn, 27 Jan. 1809, and endorsement.

single stroke of the official pen had raised him from starvation to opulence, and thenceforward, when food was cheap and the purchasing power of the penny high, he regaled himself daily, as at Limerick in 1814, on such abundant fare as a pound of beef, seven and a half pounds of potatoes, a pint of milk, a quart of porter, a boiling of greens and a mess of oatmeal ; or, if he happened to be a Catholic, on fish and butter twice a week instead of beef. The quantity of potatoes is worthy of remark. It was peculiar to Ireland, where the lower classes never used bread.¹

Though faring thus sumptuously at his country's expense, the pressed man did not always pass the days of his detention in unprofitable idleness. There were certain eventualities to be thought of and provided against. Sooner or later he must go before the "gent with the swabs" and be "regulated," that is to say, stripped to the waist, or further if that exacting officer deemed it advisable, and be critically examined for physical ailments and bodily defects. In this examination the local "saw-bones" would doubtless lend a hand, and to outwit the combined skill of both captain and surgeon was a point of honour with the pressed man if by any possibility it could be done. With this laudable end in view he devoted much of his enforced leisure to the rehearsal of such symptoms and the fabrication of such defects as were best calculated to make him a free man.

For the sailor to deny his vocation was worse than useless. The ganger's shrewd code—"All as says they be land-lubbers when I says they baint, be liars, and all liars be seamen"—effectually shut that

¹ *Ad. I.* 1455—Capt. Argles, 1 March 1814.

door in his face. There were other openings, it is true, whereby a knowing chap might wriggle free, but officers and medicoes were extremely "fly." He had not practised his many deceptions upon them through long years for nothing. They well knew that on principle he "endeavoured by every stratagem in his power to impose"—that he was, in short, a cunning cheat whose most serious ailments were to be regarded with the least sympathy and the utmost suspicion. Yet in spite of this disquieting fact the old hand, whom long practice had made an adept at deception, and who, when he was so inclined, could simulate "complaints of a nature to baffle the skill of any professional man,"¹ rarely if ever faced the ordeal of regulating without "trying it on." Often, indeed, he anticipated it. There was nothing like keeping his hand in.

Fits were his great stand-by,² and the time he chose for these convulsive turns was generally night, when he could count upon a full house and nothing to detract from the impressiveness of the show. Suddenly, at night, then, a weird, horribly inarticulate cry is heard issuing from the press-room, and at once all is uproar and confusion. Unable to make himself heard, much less to restore order, and fearing that murder is being done amongst the pressed men, the sentry hastily summons the officer, who rushes down, half-dressed, and hails the press-room.

"Hullo! within there. What's wrong?"

Swift silence. Then, "Man in a fit, sir," replies a quavering voice.

¹ *Ad.* I. 1540—Capt. Barker, 5 Nov. 1807.

² *Ad.* I. 1534—Capt. Barker, 11 Jan. 1805, and many instances.

"Out with him!" cries the officer.

Immediately, the door being hurriedly unbarred, the "case" is handed out by his terrified companions, who are only too glad to be rid of him. To all appearances he is in a true epileptic state. In the light of the lantern, held conveniently near by one of the gangsmen, who have by this time turned out in various stages of undress, his features are seen to be strongly convulsed. His breathing is laboured and noisy, his head rolls incessantly from side to side. Foam tinged with blood oozes from between his gnashing teeth, flecking his lips and beard, and when his limbs are raised they fall back as rigid as iron.¹

After surveying him critically for a moment the officer, if he too is an old hand, quietly removes the candle from the lantern and with a deft turn of his wrist tips the boiling-hot contents of the tallow cup surrounding the flaming wick out upon the bare arm or exposed chest of the "case." When the fit was genuine, as of course it sometimes was, the test had no particular reviving effect; but if the man were shamming, as he probably was in spite of the great consistency of his symptoms, the chances were that, with all his nerve and foreknowledge of what was in store for him, the sudden biting of the fiery liquid into his naked flesh would bring him to his feet dancing with pain and cursing and banning to the utmost extent of his elastic vocabulary.

¹ Almost the only symptom of *le grand mal* which the sailor could not successfully counterfeit was the abnormal dilation of the pupils so characteristic of that complaint, and this difficulty he overcame by rolling his eyes up till the pupils were invisible.

When this happened, "Put him back," said the officer. "He'll do, aloof or aloft."

Going aloft at sea was the true epileptic's chief dread. And with good reason, for sooner or later it meant a fall, and death.

In the meantime other enterprising members of the press-room community made ready for the scrutiny of the official eye in various ways, practising many devices for procuring a temporary disability and a permanent discharge. Some, horrible thought! "rubbed themselves with Cow Itch and Whipped themselves with Nettles to appear in Scabbs"; others "burnt themselves with oil of vitriol" to induce symptoms with difficulty distinguishable from those of scurvy, that disease of such dread omen to the fleet; whilst others emulated the passing of the poor consumptive of the canting epitaph, whose "legs it was that carried her off." Bad legs, indeed, ran a close race with fits in the pressed man's sprint for liberty. They were so easily induced, and so cheaply. The industrious application of the smallest copper coin procurable, the humble farthing or the halfpenny, speedily converted the most insignificant abrasion of the skin into a festering sore.¹

Here and there a man of iron nerve, acting on the common belief that if you had lost a finger the Navy would have none of you, adopted a more heroic method of shaking off the clutch of the gang. Such a man was Samuel Caradine, some time in-

¹ *Ad.* i. 1439—Capt. Ambrose, 20 June 1741; *Ad.* i. 1544—Capt. Bowyer, 18 Dec. 1808; *Ad.* i. 1451—A. Clarke, Examining Surgeon at Dublin, 18 May 1807; *Ad.* i. 1517—Letters of Capt. Brenton, March and April 1797, and many instances.

habitant of Kendal. Committed to the House of Correction there as a preliminary to his being turned over to the fleet for crimes that he had done, he expressed a desire to bid farewell to his wife. She was sent for, and came, apparently not unprepared; for after she had greeted her man through the iron door of his cell, "he put his hand underneath, and she, with a mallet and chisel concealed for the purpose, struck off a finger and thumb to render him unfit for His Majesty's service."¹

A stout-hearted fellow named Browne, who hailed from Chester, would have made Caradine a fitting mate. "Being impressed into the sea service, he very violently determined, in order to extricate himself therefrom, to mutilate the thumb and a finger of his left hand; which he accomplished by repeatedly maiming them with an old hatchet that he had obtained for that purpose. He was immediately discharged."² Such men as these were a substantial loss to the service. Fighting a gun shoulder to shoulder, what fearful execution would they not have wrought upon the "hereditary enemy"!

It did not always do, however, to presume upon the loss of a forefinger, particularly if it were missing from the left hand. Capt. Barker, while he was regulating the press at Bristol, once had occasion to send into Ilchester for a couple of brace of convicts who had received the royal pardon on condition of their serving at sea. Near Shepton Mallet, on the return tramp, his gangsmen fell in with a party armed with sticks and knives, who "beat and cut them in a very cruel manner." They succeeded, however,

¹ *Times*, 3 Nov. 1795.

² *Liverpool Advertiser*, 6 June 1777.

in taking the ringleader, one Charles Biggen, and brought him in; but when Barker would have discharged the fellow because his left forefinger was wanting, the Admiralty brushed the customary rule aside and ordered him to be kept.¹

The main considerations entering into the dispatch of pressed men to the fleet, when at length their period of detention at headquarters came to an end, were economy, speed and safety. Transport was necessarily either by land or water, and in the case of seaport, river or canal towns, both modes were of course available. Gangs operating at a distance from the sea, or remote from a navigable river or canal, were from their very situation obliged to send their catch to market either wholly by land, or by land and water successively. Land transport, though always healthier, and in many instances speedier and cheaper than transport by water, was nevertheless much more risky. Pressed men therefore preferred it. The risks—rescue and desertion—were all in their favour. Hence, when they “offered chearfully to walk up,” or down, as the case might be, the seeming magnanimity of the offer was never permitted to blind those in charge of them to the need for a strong attendant guard.² The men would have had to walk in any case, for transport by coach, though occasionally sanctioned, was an event of rare

¹ *Ad. I.* 1528—Capt. Barker, 28 July 1803, and endorsement.

² In the spring of 1795 a body of Quota Men, some 130 strong, voluntarily marched from Liverpool to London, a distance of 182 miles, instead of travelling by coach as at first proposed. Though all had received the bounty and squandered it in debauchery, not a man deserted; and in their case the danger of rescue was of course absent. *Ad. I.* 1511—Capt. Bowen, 21 April 1795.

occurrence. A number procured in Berkshire were in 1756 forwarded to London "by the Reading machines," but this was an exceptional indulgence due to the state of their feet, which were already "blistered with travelling."

Even with the precaution of a strong guard, there were parts of the country through which it was highly imprudent, if not altogether impracticable, to venture a party on foot. Of these the thirty-mile stretch of road between Kilkenny and Waterford, the nearest seaport, perhaps enjoyed the most unenviable reputation. No gang durst traverse it; and no body of pressed men, and more particularly of pressed Catholics, could ever have been conveyed even for so short a distance through a country inhabited by a fanatical and strongly disaffected people without courting certain bloodshed. The naval authorities in consequence left Kilkenny severely alone.¹

The sending of men overland from Appledore to Plymouth, a course frequently adopted to avoid the circuitous sea-route, was attended with similar risks. The hardy miners and quarrymen of the intervening moorlands loved nothing so much as knocking the gangsmen on the head.²

The attenuated neck of land between the Mersey and the Dee had an evil reputation for affairs of this description. Men pressed at Chester, and sent across the neck to the tenders or ships of war in the Mersey, seldom reached their destination unless attended by an exceptionally strong escort. The reason is briefly

¹ *Ad.* 1. 1529—Capt. Bowen, 12 Oct. 1803.

² *Ad.* 1. 581—Admiral Berkeley, Report on Rendezvous, 22 Sept. 1805.

but graphically set forth by Capt. Ayscough, who dispatched three such men from Chester, under convoy of his entire gang, in 1780. "On the road thither," says he, "about seven miles from hence, at a village called Sutton, they were met by upwards of one Hundred Arm'd Seamen from Parkgate, belonging to different privateers at Liverpool. An Affray ensued, and the three Impress'd men were rescued by the Mobb, who Shot one of my Gang through the Body and wounded two others."¹ Parkgate, it will be recalled, was a notorious "nest of seamen." The alternative route to Liverpool, by passage-boat down the Dee, was both safer and cheaper. To send a pressed man that way, accompanied by two of the gang, cost only twelve-and-six.²

Mr. Midshipman Goodave and party, convoying pressed men from Lymington to Southampton, once met with an adventure in traversing the New Forest which, notwithstanding its tragic sequel, is not without its humorous side. They had left the little fishing village of Lepe some miles behind, and were just getting well into the Forest, when a cavalcade of mounted men, some thirty strong, all muffled in greatcoats and armed to the teeth, unexpectedly emerged from the wood and opened fire upon them. Believing it to be an attempt at rescue, the gang closed in about their prisoners, but when one of these was the first to fall, his arm shattered and an ear shot off, the gangsmen, perceiving their mistake, broke and fled in all directions. Not far, however. The

¹ *Ad. I.* 1446—Capt. Ayscough, 17 Nov. 1780.

² *Ad. I.* 580—Admiral Phillip, 14 Sept. 1804.

smugglers, for such they were, quickly rounded them up and proceeded, not to shoot them, as the would-be fugitives anticipated, but to administer to them the "smugglers' oath." This they did by forcing them on their knees and compelling them, at the point of the pistol and with horrible execrations, to "wish their eyes might drop out if they told their officers which way they, the smugglers, were gone." Having extorted this unique pledge of secrecy as to their movements, they rode away into the Forest, unaware that Mr. Midshipman Goodave, snugly ensconced in the neighbouring ditch, had seen and heard all that passed—a piece of discretion on his part that later on brought at least one of the smugglers into distressing contact with the law.¹

Just as the dangers of the sea sometimes rendered it safer to dispatch pressed men from seaport towns by land—as at Exmouth, where the entrance to the port was in certain weathers so hazardous as to bottle all shipping up, or shut it out, for days together—so the dangers peculiar to the land rendered it as often expedient to dispatch them from inland towns by water. This was the case at Stourbridge. Handed over to contractors responsible for their safe-keeping, the numerous seamen taken by the gangs in that town and vicinity were delivered on board the tenders in King Road, below Bristol—conveyed thither by water, at a cost of half a guinea per head. This sum included subsistence, which would appear to have been mainly by water also. To Liverpool, the alternative port of delivery, carriage could only be

¹ *Ad.* 7. 300—Law Officers' Opinions, 1778–83, No. 18: Informations of Shepherd Goodave, 1 Oct. 1779.

had by land, and the risks of land transit in that direction were so great as to be considered insuperable, to say nothing of the cost.¹

At ports such as Liverpool, Dublin and Hull, where His Majesty's ships made frequent calls, the readiest means of disposing of pressed men was of course to put them immediately on ship-board; but when no ship was thus available, or when, though available, she was bound foreign or on other prohibitive service, there was nothing for it, in the case of rendezvous lying so far afield as to render land transport impracticable, but to forward the harvest of the gangs by water. In this way there grew up a system of sea transport that centred from many distant and widely separated points of the kingdom upon those great entrepôts for pressed men, the Hamoaze, Spithead and the Nore.

Now and then, for reasons of economy or expediency, men were shipped to these destinations as "passengers" on colliers and merchant vessels, their escort consisting of a petty officer and one or more gangsmen, according to the number to be safeguarded. Occasionally they had no escort at all, the masters being simply bound over to make good all losses arising from any cause save death, capture by an enemy's ship or the act of God. From King's Lynn to the Nore the rate per head, by this means of transport, was £2, 15s., including victualling; from Hull, £2, 12s. 6d.; from Newcastle, 10s. 6d. The lower rates for the longer runs are explained by the fact that, shipping facilities being so much more numerous on the Humber and the Tyne, competi-

¹ *Ad. I.* 1500—Letters of Capt. Beecher, 1780.

tion reduced the cost of carriage in proportion to its activity.¹

In spite of every precaution, such serious loss attended the shipping of men in this manner as to force the Admiralty back upon its own resources. Recourse was accordingly had, in the great majority of cases, to that handy auxiliary of the fleet, the hired tender. Tenders fell into two categories — cruising tenders, employed exclusively, or almost exclusively, in pressing afloat after the manner described in an earlier chapter, and tenders used for the double purpose of “keeping” men pressed on land and of conveying them to the fleet when their numbers grew to such proportions as to make a full and consequently dangerous ship. In theory, “any old unmasted hulk, unfit to send to sea, would answer to keep pressed men in.”² In practice, the contrary was the case. Fitness for sea, combined with readiness to slip at short notice, was more essential than mere cubic capacity, since transshipment was thus avoided and the pressed man deprived of another chance of taking French leave.

One all-important consideration, in the case of tenders employed for the storing and detention of pressed men prior to their dispatch to the fleet, was that the vessel should be able to lie afloat at low water ; for if the fall of the tide left her high and dry, the risk of desertion, as well as of attack from the shore, was enormously increased. Whitehaven could make no use of man-storing tenders for this reason ;

¹ *Ad.* 1. 579—Admiral Phillip, 3 and 11 Aug. 1801 ; Admiral Pringle, 2 April 1795.

² *Ad.* 1. 579—Admiral Pringle, 2 April 1795.

and at the important centre of King's Lynn, which was really a receiving station for three counties, it was found "requisite to have always a vessel below the Deeps to keep pressed men aboard," since their escape or rescue by way of the flats was in any anchorage nearer the town a foregone conclusion.¹

On board the tenders the comfort and health of the pressed man were no more studied than in the strong-rooms and prisons ashore. A part of the hold was required to be roughly but substantially partitioned off for his security, and on rare occasions this space was fitted with bunks; but as the men usually arrived "all very bare of necessaries"—except when pressed afloat, a case we are not now considering—any provision for the slinging of hammocks, or the spreading of bedding they did not possess, came to be looked upon as a superfluous and uncalled-for proceeding. Even the press-room was a rarity, save in tenders that had been long in the service. Down in the hold of the vessel, whither the men were turned like so many sheep as soon as they arrived on board, they perhaps found a rough platform of deal planks provided for them to lie on, and from this they were at liberty to extract such sorry comfort as they could during the weary days and nights of their incarceration. Other conveniences they had none. When this too was absent, as not infrequently happened, they were reduced to the necessity of "laying about on the Cables and Cask," suffering in consequence "more than can well be expressed."² It is not too much

¹ *Ad.* I. 1486—Capt. Baird, 27 Feb. 1755.

² *Ad.* I. 1439—Capt. A'Court, 22 April 1741; *Ad.* I. 1497—Capt. Bover, 11 Feb. 1777, and Captains' Letters, *passim*.

to say that transported convicts had better treatment.

Cooped up for weeks at a stretch in a space invariably crowded to excess, deprived almost entirely of light, exercise and fresh air, and poisoned with bad water and what Roderick Random so truthfully called the "noisome stench of the place," it is hardly surprising that on protracted voyages from such distant ports as Limerick or Leith the men should have "fallen sick very fast."¹ Officers were, indeed, charged "to be very careful of the healths of the seamen" entrusted to their keeping; yet in spite of this most salutary regulation, so hopelessly bad were the conditions under which the men were habitually carried, and so slight was the effort made to ameliorate them, that few tenders reached their destination without a more or less serious outbreak of fever, small-pox or some other equally malignant distemper. Upon the fleet the effect was appalling. Sickly tenders could not but make sickly ships.

If the material atmosphere of the tender's hold was bad, its moral atmosphere was unquestionably worse. Dark deeds were done here at times, and no man "peached" upon his fellows. Out of this deplorable state of things a remarkable legal proceeding once grew. Murder having been committed in the night, and none coming forward to implicate the offender, the coroner's jury, instead of returning their verdict against some person or persons unknown, found the entire occupants of the tender's hold, seventy-two in number, guilty of that crime. A

¹ *Ad. I.* 1444—Capt. Allen, 4 March 1771, and Captains' Letters, *passim*.

warrant was actually issued for their apprehension, though never executed. To put the men on their trial was a useless step, since, in the circumstances, they would have been most assuredly acquitted.¹ Just as assuredly any informer in their midst would have been murdered.

The scale of victualling on board the tenders was supposed to be the same as on shore. "Full allowance daily" was the rule; and if the copper proved too small to serve all at one boiling, there were to be as many boilings as should be required to go round. Unhappily for the pressed man, there was a weevil in his daily bread. While it was the bounden duty of the master of the vessel to feed him properly, and of the officers to see that he was properly fed, "officers and masters generally understood each other too well in the pursery line."² Rations were consequently short, boilings deficient, and though the cabin went well content, the hold was the scene of bitter grumbings.

Nor were these the only disabilities the pressed man laboured under. His officers proved a sore trial to him. The Earl of Pembroke, Lord High Admiral, foreseeing that this would be the case, directed that he should be "used with all possible tenderness and humanity." The order was little regarded. The callosity of Smollett's midshipman, who spat in the pressed man's face when he dared to complain of his sufferings, and roughly bade him die for aught he cared, was characteristic of the service. Hence a later regulation, with grim irony, gave directions for his burial. He was to be put out of the way, as soon

¹ *Ad.* 7. 300—Law Officers' Opinions, 1778-83, No. 20.

² *Ad.* 1. 579—Admiral M'Bride, 19 March 1795.

as might be after the fatal conditions prevailing on board His Majesty's tenders had done their work, with as great a show of decency as could be extracted from the sum of ten shillings.

Strictly speaking, it was not in the power of the tender's officers to mitigate the hardships of the pressed man's lot to any appreciable extent, let them be as humane as they might. For this the pressed man himself was largely to blame. An ungrateful rogue, his hide was as impervious to kindness as a duck's back to water. Supply him with slops¹ wherewith to cover his nakedness or shield him from the cold, and before the Sunday muster came round the garments had vanished—not into thin air, indeed, but in tobacco and rum, for which forbidden luxuries he invariably bartered them with the bumboat women who had the run of the vessel while she remained in harbour. Or allow him on deck to take the air and such exercise as could be got there, and the moment your back was turned he was away *sans congé*. Few of these runaways were as considerate as that Scotch humorist, William Ramsay, who was pressed at Leith for beating an informer and there put on board the tender. Seizing the first opportunity of absconding, "Sir," he wrote to the lieutenant in command, "I am so much attached to you for the good usage I have received at your hands, that I cannot think of venturing on board your ship again in the present state of affairs. I therefore leave this letter at my father's

¹ The regulations stipulated that slops should be served out to all who needed them; but as their acceptance was held to set up a contract between the recipient and the Crown, the pressed man was not unnaturally averse from drawing upon such a source of supply as long as any chance of escape remained to him.

to inform you that I intend to slip out of the way.”¹

When that clever adventuress, Moll Flanders, found herself booked for transportation beyond the seas, her one desire, it will be recalled, was “to come back before she went.” So it was with the pressed man. The idea of escape obsessed him—escape before he should be rated on shipboard and sent away to heaven only knew what remote quarter of the globe. It was for this reason that irons were so frequently added to his comforts. “Safe bind, safe find” was the golden rule on board His Majesty’s tenders.

How difficult it was for him to carry his cherished design into execution, and yet how easy, is brought home to us with surprising force by the catastrophe that befell the *Tasker* tender. On the 23rd of May 1755 the *Tasker* sailed out of the Mersey with a full cargo of pressed men designed for Spithead. She possessed no press-room, and as the men for that reason had the run of the hold, all hatches were securely battened down with the exception of the maindeck scuttle, an opening so small as to admit of the passage of but one man at a time. Her crew numbered thirty-eight, and elaborate precautions were taken for the safe-keeping of her restless human freight. So much is evident from the disposition of her guard, which was as follows :—

- (a) At the open scuttle two sentries, armed with pistol and cutlass. Orders, not to let too many men up at once.

¹ *Ad.* 1. 1524.—Capt. Brenton, 20 Oct. 1800.

- (b) On the fore-castle two sentries, armed with musket and bayonet. Orders, to fire on any pressed man who should attempt to swim away.
- (c) On the poop one sentry, similarly armed, and having similar orders.
- (d) On the quarter-deck, at the entrance to the great cabin, where the remaining arms were kept, one sentry, armed with cutlass and pistol. Orders, to let no pressed man come upon the quarter-deck.

There were thus six armed sentinels stationed about the ship—ample to have nipped in the bud any attempt to seize the vessel, but for two serious errors of judgment on the part of the officer responsible for their disposition. These were, first, the discretionary power vested in the sentries at the scuttle ; and, second, the inadequate guard, a solitary man, set for the defence of the great cabin and the arms it contained. Now let us see how these errors of judgment affected the situation.

Either through stupidity, bribery or because they were rapidly making an offing, the sentries at the scuttle, as the day wore on, admitted a larger number of pressed men to the comparative freedom of the deck than was consistent with prudence. The number eventually swelled to fourteen—sturdy, determined fellows, the pick of the hold. One of them, having a fiddle, struck up a merry tune, the rest fell to dancing, the tender's crew who were off duty caught the infection and joined in, while the officers stood looking on, tolerantly amused and wholly un-

suspicious of danger. Suddenly, just when the fun was at its height, a splash was heard, a cry of "Man overboard!" ran from lip to lip, and officers and crew rushed to the vessel's side. They were there, gazing into the sea, for only a minute or two, but by the time they turned their faces inboard again the fourteen determined men were masters of the ship. In the brief disciplinary interval they had overpowered the guard and looted the cabin of its store of arms. That night they carried the tender into Redwharf Bay and there bade her adieu.¹ To pursue them in so mountainous a country would have been useless; to punish them, even had they been retaken, impossible. As unrated men they were neither mutineers nor deserters,² and the seizure of the tender was at the worst a bloodless crime in which no one was hurt save an obdurate sentry, who was slashed over the head with a cutlass.

The boldness of its inception and the anticlimaxical nature of its finish invest another exploit of this description with an interest all its own. This was the cutting out of the *Union* tender from the river Tyne on the 12th April 1777. The commander, Lieut. Colville, having that day gone on shore for the

¹ *Ad.* 1. 920—Admiral Sir Edward Hawke, 3 June 1755, and enclosures.

² By 4 & 5 Anne, cap. 6, pressed men could be apprehended and tried for desertion by virtue of the Queen's shilling having been forced upon them at the time they were pressed, but as the use of that coin fell into abeyance, so the Act in question became gradually a dead-letter. Hay, Murray, Lloyd, Pinfold and Jervis, Law Officers of the Crown, giving an opinion on this important point in 1756, held that "pressed men are not subject to the Articles (of War) until they are actually rated on board some of His Majesty's ships."—*Ad.* 7. 299—Law Officers' Opinions, 1756-77, No. 3, Case 2.

“benefit of the air,” and young Barker, the midshipman who was left in charge in his absence, having surreptitiously followed suit, the pressed men and volunteers, to the number of about forty, taking advantage of the opportunity thus presented, rose and seized the vessel, loaded the great guns, and by dint of threatening to sink any boat that should attempt to board them kept all comers, including the commander himself, at bay till nine o'clock in the evening. By that time night had fallen, so, with the wind blowing strong off-shore and an ebb-tide running, they cut the cables and stood out to sea. For three days nothing was heard of them, and North Shields, the scene of the exploit and the home of most of the runaways, was just on the point of giving the vessel up for lost when news came that she was safe. Influenced by one Benjamin Lamb, a pressed man of more than ordinary character, the rest had relinquished their original purpose of either crossing over to Holland or running the vessel ashore on some unfrequented part of the coast, and had instead carried her into Scarborough Bay, doubtless hoping to land there without interference and so make their way to Whitby or Hull. In this design, however, they were partly frustrated, for, a force having been hastily organised for their apprehension, they were waylaid as they came ashore and retaken to the number of twenty-two, the rest escaping. Lamb, discharged for his good offices in saving the tender, was offered a boatswain's place if he would re-enter; but for poor Colville the affair proved disastrous. Becoming demented, he attempted to shoot himself and had to be superseded.¹

¹ *Ad. I.* 1497—Capt. Bover, 13 April 1777, and enclosures.

All down through the century similar incidents, crowding thick and fast one upon another, relieved the humdrum routine of the pressed man's passage to the fleet, and either made his miserable life in a measure worth living or brought it to a summary conclusion. Of minor incidents, all tending to the same happy or unhappy end, there was no lack. Now he sweltered beneath a sun so hot as to cause the pitch to boil in the seams of the deck above his head; again, as when the *Boneta* sloop, conveying pressed men from Liverpool to the Hamoaze in 1740, encountered "Bedds of two or three Acres bigg of Ice & of five or Six foot thicknesse, which struck her with such force 'twas enough to drive her bows well out," he "almost perished" from cold.¹ To-day it was broad farce. He held his sides with laughter to see the lieutenant of the tender he was in, mad with rage and drink, chase the steward round and round the mainmast with a loaded pistol, whilst the terrified hands, fearing for their lives, fled for refuge to the coalhole, the roundtops and the shore.² To-morrow it was tragedy. Some "little dirty privateer" swooped down upon him, as in the case of the *Admiral Spry* tender from Waterford to Plymouth,³ and consigned him to what he dreaded infinitely more than any man-o'-war—a French prison; or contrary winds, swelling into a sudden gale, drove him a helpless wreck on to some treacherous coast, as they drove the *Rich Charlotte*

¹ *Ad.* I. 2732—Capt. Young, 8 Feb. 1739-40.

² *Ad.* I. 1498—Complaint of the Master and Company of H.M. Hired Tender *Speedwell*, 21 Dec. 1778.

³ *Ad.* I. 1500—Dickson, Surveyor of Customs at the Cove of Cork, 20 April 1780.

upon the Formby Sands in 1745,¹ and there remorselessly drowned him.

Provided he escaped such untoward accidents as death or capture by the enemy, sooner or later the pressed man arrived at the receiving station. Here another ordeal awaited him, and here also he made his last bid for freedom.

Taking the form of a final survey or regulating, the ordeal the pressed man had now to face was no less thoroughgoing than its precursor at the rendezvous had in all probability been superficial and ineffective. Eyes saw deeper here, wits were sharper, and in this lay at once the pressed man's bane and salvation. For if genuinely unfit, the fact was speedily demonstrated; whereas if merely shamming, discovery overtook him with a certainty that wrote "finis" to his last hope. Nevertheless, for this ordeal, as for his earlier regulating at the rendezvous, the sailor who knew his book prepared himself with exacting care during the tedium of his voyage.

No sooner was he mustered for survey, then, than the most extraordinary, impudent and in many instances transparent impostures were sprung upon his examiners. Deafness prevailed to an alarming extent, dumbness was by no means unknown. Men who fought desperately when the gang took them, or who played cards with great assiduity in the tender's hold, developed sudden paralysis of the arms.² Legs which had been soundness itself at the rendezvous

¹ *Ad. I.* 1440—Capt. Amherst, 4 Oct. 1745.

² *Ad. I.* 1464—Capt. Bloyes, Jan. 1702-3; *Ad. I.* 1470—Capt. Bennett, 26 Sept. 1711. An extraordinary instance of this form of malingering is cited in the "Naval Sketch-Book," 1826.

were now a putrefying mass of sores. The itch broke out again, virulent and from all accounts incurable. Fits returned with redoubled frequency and violence, the sane became demented or idiotic, and the most obviously British, losing the use of their mother tongue, swore with many gesticulatory *sacrés* that they had no English, as indeed they had none for naval purposes. Looking at the miserable, disease-ridden crew, the uninitiated spectator was moved to tears of pity. Not so the naval officer. In France, when a prisoner of war, learning French there without a master, he had heard a saying that he now recalled to some purpose: *Vin de grain est plus doux que n'est pas vin de presse*—"Willing duties are sweeter than those that are extorted." The punning allusion to the press had tickled his fancy and fixed the significant truism in his memory. From it he now took his cue and proceeded to man his ship.

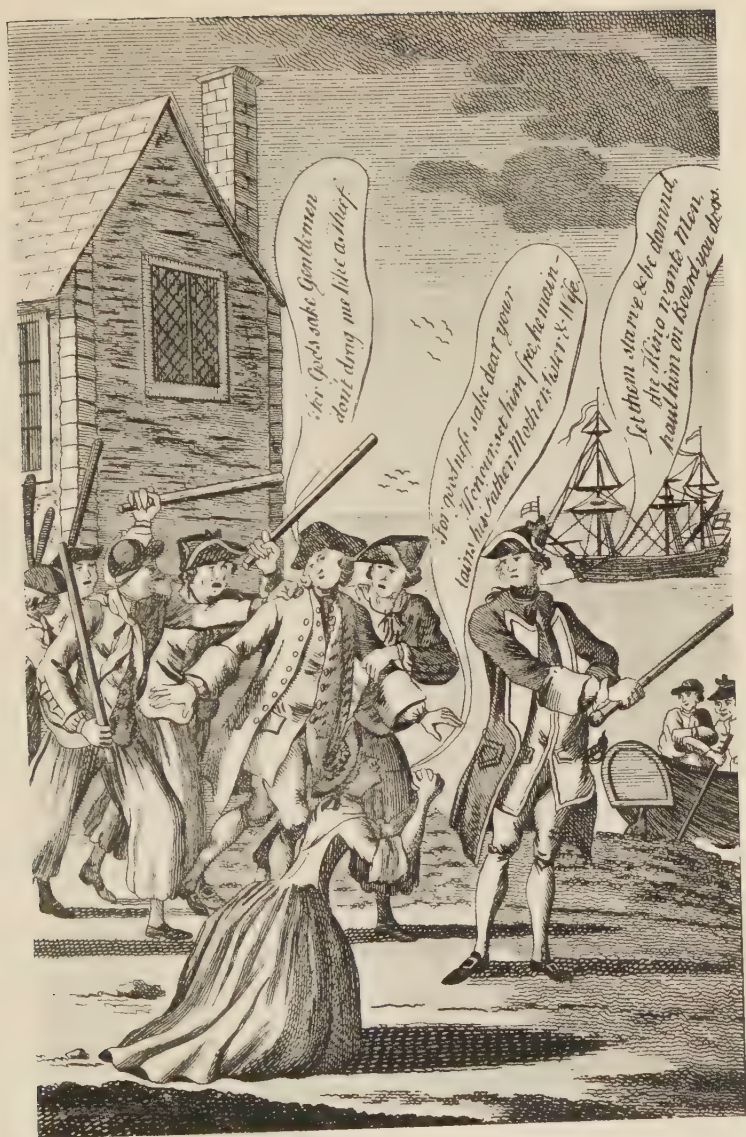
So at length the pressed man, in spite of all his ruses and protestations, was rated and absorbed into that vast agglomeration of men and ships known as the fleet. Here he underwent a speedy metamorphosis. It was not that he lost his individuality and became a mere unit amongst thousands. Quite the contrary. Friends, creditors or next-of-kin, concocting petitions on his behalf, set forth in heart-rending terms the many disabilities he suffered from, together with many he did not, and prayed, with a fervour often reaching no deeper than their pockets, that he might be restored without delay to his bereaved and destitute family. Across the bottom right-hand corner of these petitions, conveniently upturned for that purpose, the Admiralty scrawled its initial order:

“Let his case be stated.” The immediate effect of this expenditure of Admiralty ink was magical. It promoted the subject of the petition from the ranks, so to speak, and raised him to the dignity of a “State the Case Man.”

He now became a person of consequence. The kindest inquiries were made after his health. The state of his eyes, the state of his limbs, the state of his digestion were all stated with the utmost minuteness and prolixity. Reams of gilt-edged paper were squandered upon him; and by the time his case had been duly stated, restated, considered, reconsidered and finally decided, the poor fellow had perhaps voyaged round the world or by some mischance gone to the next.

In the matter of exacting their pound of flesh the Lords Commissioners were veritable Shylocks. Neither supplications nor tears had power to move them, and though they sometimes relented, it was invariably for reasons of policy and in the best interests of the service. Men clearly shown to be protected they released. They could not go back upon their word unless some lucky quibble rendered it possible to traverse the obligation with honour. Unprotected subjects who were clearly unfit to eat the king's victuals they discharged—for substitutes.

The principle underlying their Lordships' gracious acceptance of substitutes for pressed men was beautifully simple. If as a pressed man you were fit to serve, but unwilling, you were worth at least two able-bodied men; if you were unfit, and hence unable to serve, you were worth at least one. This simple rule proved a source of great encouragement to the



THE PRESS-GANG, OR ENGLISH LIBERTY DISPLAYED.

gangs, for however bad a man might be he was always worth a better.

The extortions to which the Lords Commissioners lent themselves in this connection—three, and, as in the case of Joseph Sanders of Bristol,¹ even four able-bodied men being exacted as substitutes—could only be termed iniquitous did we not know the duplicity, roguery and deep cunning with which they had to cope. Upon the poor, indeed, the practice entailed great hardship, particularly when the home had to be sacrificed in order to obtain the discharge of the bread-winner who had been instrumental in getting it together; but to the unscrupulous crimp and the shady attorney the sailor's misfortune brought only gain. Buying up "raw boys," or Irishmen who "came over for reasons they did not wish known"—rascally persons who could be had for a song—they substituted these for seasoned men who had been pressed, and immediately, having got the latter in their power, turned them over to merchant ships at a handsome profit. At Hull, on the other hand, substitutes were sought in open market. The bell-man there cried a reward for men to go in that capacity.²

Even when the pressed man had procured his substitutes and obtained his coveted discharge, his liberty was far from assured. In theory exempt from the press for a period of at least twelve months, he was in reality not only liable to be re-pressed at any moment, but to be subjected to that process as often as he chose to free himself and the gang to

¹ *Ad.* I. 1534—Capt. Barker, 4 Jan. 1805, and endorsement.

² *Ad.* I. 1439—George Crowle, Esq., M.P. for Hull, 28 Dec. 1739.

take him. A Liverpool youth named William Crick a lad with expectations to the amount of "near £4000," was in this way pressed and discharged by substitute three times in quick succession.¹ Intending substitutes themselves not infrequently suffered the same fate ere they could carry out their intention.²

The discharging of a pressed man whose petition finally succeeded did not always prove to be the eminently simple matter it would seem. Time and tide waited for no man, least of all for the man who had the misfortune to be pressed, and in the interval between his appeal and the order for his release his ship, as already hinted, had perhaps put half the circumference of the globe between him and home; or when the crucial moment arrived, and he was summoned before his commander to learn the gratifying Admiralty decision, he made his salute in batches of two, three or even four men, each of whom protested vehemently that he was the original and only person to whom the order applied. An amusing attempt at "coming Cripplegate" in this manner occurred on board the *Lennox* in 1711. A woman, who gave her name as Alice Williams, having petitioned for the release of her "brother," one John Williams, a pressed man then on board that ship, succeeded in her petition, and orders were sent down to the commander, Capt. Bennett, to give the man his discharge. He proceeded to do so, but to his amazement discovered, first, that he had no less than four John Williamses on board, all pressed men;

¹ *Ad.* 1. 579—Rear-Admiral Child, 8 Aug. 1799.

² *Ad.* 1. 1439—Lieut. Leaver, 5 Jan. 1739-40, and numerous instances.

second, that while each of the four claimed to be the man in question, three of the number had no sister, while the fourth confessed to one whose name was not Alice but "Percilly"; and, after long and patient investigation, third, that one of them had a wife named Alice, who, he being a foreigner domiciled by marriage, had "tould him she would gett him cleare" should he chance to fall into the hands of the press-gang. In this she failed, for he was kept.¹

Of the pressed man's smiling arrest for debts which he did not owe, and of his jocular seizure by sheriffs armed with writs of Habeas Corpus, the annals of his incorporation in the fleet furnish many instances. Arrest for fictitious debt was specially common. In every seaport town attorneys were to be found who made it their regular practice. Particularly was this true of Bristol. Good seamen were rarely pressed there for whom writs were not immediately issued on the score of debts of which they had never heard.² To warrant such arrest the debt had to exceed twenty pounds, and service, when the pressed man was already on shipboard, was by the hands of the Water Bailiff.

The writ of Habeas Corpus was, in effect, the only legal check it was possible to oppose to the impudent pretensions and high-handed proceedings of the gang. While H.M.S. *Amaranth* lay in dock in 1804 and her company were temporarily quartered on a hulk in Long Reach, two sheriff's officers, accompanied by a man named Cumberland, a tailor of Deptford, boarded the latter and served a writ on a seaman for debt.

¹ *Ad. I.* 1470—Capt. Bennett, 2 Dec. 1711.

² *Ad. I.* 579—Admiral Philip, 5 Dec. 1801.

The first lieutenant, who was in charge at the time, refused to let the man go, saying he would first send to his captain, then at the dock, for orders, which he accordingly did. The intruders thereupon went over the side, Cumberland "speaking very insultingly." Just as the messenger returned with the captain's answer, however, they again put in an appearance, and the lieutenant hailed them and bade them come aboard. Cumberland complied. "I have orders from my captain," said the lieutenant, stepping up to him, "to press you." He did so, and had it not been that a writ of Habeas Corpus was immediately sworn out, the Deptford tailor would most certainly have exchanged his needle for a marlinespike.¹

Provocative as such redemptive measures were, and designedly so, they were as a rule allowed to pass unchallenged. The Lords Commissioners regretted the loss of the men, but thought "perhaps it would be as well to let them go."² For this complacent attitude on the part of his captors the pressed man had reason to hold the Law Officers of the Crown in grateful remembrance. As early as 1755 they gave it as their opinion—too little heeded—that to bring any matter connected with pressing to judicial trial would be "very imprudent." Later, with the lesson of twenty-two years' hard pressing before their eyes, they went still further, for they then advised that a subject so contentious, not to say so ill-defined in law, should be kept, if not altogether, at least as much as possible out of court.³

¹ *Ad.* 1. 1532—Lieut. Collett, 13 Feb. 1804.

² *Ad.* 7. 302—Law Officers' Opinions, 1783-95, No. 24.

³ *Ad.* 7. 298—Law Officers' Opinions, 1733-56, No. 99 ; *Ad.* 7. 299—Law Officers' Opinions, 1756-77, No. 70.

CHAPTER XII

HOW THE GANG WENT OUT

Not until the year 1833 did belated Nemesis overtake the press-gang. It died the unmourned victim of its own enormities, and the manner of its passing forms the by no means least interesting chapter in its extraordinary career.

Summarising the causes, direct and indirect, which led to the final scrapping of an engine that had been mainly instrumental in manning the fleet for a hundred years and more, and without which, whatever its imperfections, that fleet could in all human probability never have been manned at all, we find them to be substantially these :—

- (a) The demoralising effects of long-continued, violent and indiscriminate pressing upon the Fleet ;
- (b) Its injurious and exasperating effects upon Trade ;
- (c) Its antagonising effect upon the Nation ; and
- (d) Its enormous cost as compared with recruiting by the good-will of the People.

Frederick the Great, it is related, being in one of his grim humours after the dearly bought victory of

Czaslaw, invited the neighbouring peasantry to come and share the spoil of the carcasses on the field of battle. They responded in great numbers ; whereupon he, surrounding them, pressed three hundred of the most promising and "cloathed them immediately from the dead."¹ In this way, Ezekiel-like, he retrieved his losses ; but to the regiments so completed the addition of these resurrection recruits proved demoralising to a degree, notwithstanding the Draconic nature of the Prussian discipline. In like manner the discipline used in the British fleet, while not less drastic, failed conspicuously to counteract the dry-rot introduced and fostered by the press-gang. In its efforts to maintain the Navy, indeed, that agency came near to proving its ruin.

On the most lenient survey of the recruits it furnished, it cannot be denied that they were in the aggregate a desperately poor lot, unfitted both physically and morally for the tremendous task of protecting an island people from the attacks of powerful sea-going rivals. How bad they were, the epithets spontaneously applied to them by the outraged commanders upon whom they were foisted abundantly prove. Witness the following, taken at random from naval captains' letters extending over a hundred years :—

"Blackguards."

"Sorry poor creatures that don't earn half the victuals they eat."

"Sad, thievish creatures."

¹ *State Papers Foreign, Germany*, vol. cccxl.—Robinson to Hyndford, 31 May 1742.

“Not a rag left but what was of such a nature as had to be destroyed.”

“150 on board, the greatest part of them sorry fellows.”

“Poor ragged souls, and very small.”

“Miserable poor creatures, not a seaman amongst them, and the fleet in the same condition.”

“Unfit for service, and a nuisance to the ship.”

“Never so ill-manned a ship since I have been at sea. The worst set I ever saw.”

“Twenty-six poor souls, but three of them seamen. Ragged and half dead.”

“Landsmen, boys, incurables and cripples. Sad wretches great part of them are.”

“More fit for an hospital than the sea.”

“All the ragg-tag that can be picked up.”

In this last phrase, “All the rag-tag that can be picked up,” we have the key to the situation; for though orders to press “no aged, diseased or infirm persons, nor boys,” were sufficiently explicit, yet in order to swell the returns, and to appease in some degree the fleet’s insatiable greed for men, the gangs raked in recruits with a lack of discrimination that for the better part of a century made that fleet the most gigantic collection of human freaks and derelicts under the sun.

Billingsley, commander of the *Ferme*, receiving seventy pressed men to complete his complement in 1708, discovers to his chagrin that thirteen are lame in the legs, five lame in the hands, and three almost blind.¹ Latham, commanding the *Bristol*, on the

¹ *Ad. 1.* 1469—Capt. Billingsley, 5 May 1708.

eve of sailing for the West Indies can muster only eighteen seamen amongst sixty-eight pressed men that day put on board of him. As for the rest, they are either sick, or too old or too young to be of service—"ragged wretches, bad of the itch, who have not the least pretensions to eat His Majesty's bread." Forty of the number had to be put ashore.¹ Admiral Mostyn, boarding his flagship, the *Monarch*, "never in his life saw such a crew," though the *Monarch* had an already sufficiently evil reputation in that respect, insomuch that whenever a scarecrow man-o'-war's man was seen ashore the derisive cry instantly went up: "There goes a *Monarch*!" So hopelessly bad was the company in this instance, it was found impossible to carry the ship to sea. "I don't know where they come from," observes the Admiral, hot with indignation, "but whoever was the officer who received them, he ought to be ashamed, for I never saw such except in the condemned hole at Newgate. I was three hours and a half mustering this scabby crew, and I should have imagined that the Scum of the Earth had been picked up for this ship."² The vigorous protest prepares us for what Capt. Baird found on board the *Duke* a few years later. The pressed men there exhibited such qualifications for sea duty as "fractured thigh-bone, idiocy, strained back and sickly, a discharged soldier, gout and sixty years old, rupture, deaf and foolish, fits, lame, rheumatic and incontinence of urine."³

That most reprehensible practice, the pressing of

¹ *Ad.* I. 161—Admiral Watson, 26 Feb. 1754.

² *Ad.* I. 480—Admiral Mostyn, 1 and 6 April 1755.

³ *Ad.* I. 1490—Capt. Baird, 22 May 1759.

cripples for naval purposes, would appear to have had its origin in the unauthorised extension of an order issued by the Lord High Admiral, in 1704, to the effect that in the appointment of cooks to the Navy the Board should give preference to persons so afflicted. For the pressing of boys there existed even less warrant. Yet the practice was common, so much so that when, during the great famine of 1800, large numbers of youths flocked into Poole in search of the bread they could not obtain in the country, the gangs waylaid them and reaped a rich harvest. Two hundred was the toll on this occasion. As all were in a "very starving, ragged, filthy condition," the gangsmen stripped them, washed them thoroughly in the sea, clad them in second-hand clothing from the quay-side shops, and giving each one a knife, a spoon, a comb and a bit of soap, sent them on board the tenders contented and happy.¹ These lads were of course a cut above the "scum of the earth" so vigorously denounced by Admiral Mostyn. Beginning their career as powder-monkeys, a few years' licking into shape transformed them, as a rule, into splendid fighting material.

The utter incapacity of the human refuse dumped into the fleet is justly stigmatised by one indignant commander, himself a patient long-sufferer in that respect, as a "scandalous abuse of the service." Six of these poor wretches had not the strength of one man. They could not be got upon deck in the night, or if by dint of the rope's-end they were at length routed out of their hammocks, they immediately developed the worst symptoms of the "waister"—

¹ *Ad. I.* 579—Capt. Boyle, 2 June 1801.

seasickness and fear of that which is high.¹ Bruce, encountering dirty weather on the Irish coast, when in command of the *Hawke*, out of thirty-two pressed men "could not get above seven to go upon a yard to reef his courses," but was obliged to order his warrant officers and master aloft on that duty.² Belitha, of the *Scipio*, had but one man aboard him, out of a crew of forty-one, who was competent to stand his trick at the wheel;³ Bethell, of the *Phoenix*, had many who had "never seen a gun fired in their lives";⁴ and Adams, of the *Bird-in-hand*, learnt the fallacy of the assertion that that *rara avis* is worth two in the bush. Mustered for drill in small-arms, his men "knew no more how to handle them than a child."⁵ For all their knowledge of that useful exercise they might have been Sea-Fencibles.

Yet while ships were again and again prevented from putting to sea because, though their complements were numerically complete, they had only one or no seaman on board, and hence were unable to get their anchors or make sail;⁶ while Bennett, of the *Lennox*, when applied to by the masters of eight outward-bound East-India ships for the loan of two hundred and fifty men to enable them to engage the French privateers by whom they were held up in the river of Shannon, dared not lend a single hand lest the pressed men, who formed the greater part of his crew,

¹ *Ad.* I. 1471—Capt. Billop, 26 Oct. 1712.

² *Ad.* I. 1477—Capt. Bruce, 6 Oct. 1741.

³ *Ad.* I. 1482—Capt. Belitha, 15 July 1746.

⁴ *Ad.* I. 1490—Capt. Bethell, 21 Aug. 1759.

⁵ *Ad.* I. 1440—Capt. Adams, 7 Oct. 1744.

⁶ *Ad.* I. 1478—Capt. Boys, 14 April 1742; *Ad.* I. 1512—Capt. Bayly, 21 July 1796, and Captains' Letters, *passim*.

should rise and run away with the ship ;¹ Ambrose, of the *Rupert*, cruising off Cape Machichaco with a crew of "miserable poor wretches" whom he feared could be of "no manner of use or service" to him, after a short but sharp engagement of only an hour's duration captured, with the loss of but a single man, the largest privateer sailing out of San Sebastian—the *Duke of Vandome*, of twenty-six carriage guns and two hundred and two men, of whom twenty-nine were killed ;² and Capt. Amherst, encountering a heavy gale in Barnstable Pool, off Appledore, would have lost his ship, the low-waisted, over-masted *Mortar* sloop, had it not been for the nine men he was so lucky as to impress shortly before the gale.³ Anson regarded pressed men with suspicion. When he sailed on his famous voyage round the world his ships contained only sixty-seven ; but with his complement of five hundred reduced by sickness to two hundred and one, he was glad to add forty of those undesirables to their number out of the India-men at Wampoo.⁴ These, however, were seamen such as the gangs did not often pick up in England, where, as we have seen, the able seaman who was not fully protected avoided the press as he would a lee shore.

In addition to the sweepings of the roads and slums, there were in His Majesty's ships many who trod the decks "wide betwixt the legs, as if they had the gyves on." Peculiar to the seafaring man, the

¹ *Ad.* i. 1499—Capt. Bennett, 22 Sept. 1779.

² *Ad.* i. 1439—Capt. Ambrose, 7 July and 26 Sept. 1741.

³ *Ad.* i. 1440—Capt. Amherst, 12 Dec. 1744.

⁴ *Ad.* i. 1439—Capt. Anson, 18 Sept. 1740, and 7 Dec. 1742.

tailor and the huckstering Jew, the gait of these individuals, who belonged mostly to the sailor class, was strongly accentuated by an adventitious circumstance having no necessary connection with Israelitish descent, the sartorial board or the rolling deep. They were in fact convicts who had but recently shed their irons, and who walked wide from force of habit. Reasons of policy rather than of mercy explained their presence in the fleet. The prisons of the country, numerous and insanitary though they were, could neither hold them all nor kill them; America would have no more of them; and penal settlements, those later garden cities of a harassed government, were as yet undreamt of. In these circumstances reprieved and pardoned convicts were bestowed in about equal proportions, according to their calling and election, upon the army and the navy.

The practice was one of very respectable antiquity and antecedents. By a certain provision of the Feudal System a freeman who had committed a felony, or become hopelessly involved in debt, might purge himself of either by becoming a serf. So, at a later date, persons in the like predicament were permitted to exchange their fetters, whether of debt or iron, for the dear privilege of "spilling every drop of blood in their bodies"¹ on behalf of the sovereign whose clemency they enjoyed. Broken on the wheel of naval discipline, they "did very well in deep water." Nearer land they were given, like the jail-birds they were, to "hopping the twig."²

¹ *Ad.* 1. 5125—Petition of the Convicts on board the *Stanislaus* hulk, Woolwich, 18 May 1797.

² *Ad.* 1. 2733—Capt. Young, 21 March 1776.

The insolvent debtor, who in the majority of cases had studied his pleasures more than his constitution, was perhaps an even less desirable recruit than his cousin the emancipated convict. In his letters to the Navy Board, Capt. Aston, R.N., relates how, immediately after the passing of the later Act¹ for the freeing of such persons from their financial fetters, he "gave constant attendance for almost two years at the sittings of the Courts of Sessions in London and Surrey," lying in wait there for such debtors as should choose the sea. From the Queen's Bench Prison, the Clink, Marshalsea, Borough Compter, Poultry Compter, Wood Street Compter, Ludgate Prison and the Fleet, he obtained in that time a total of one hundred and thirty-two, to whom in every case the prest-shilling was paid. They were dear at the price. Bankrupt in pocket, stamina and health, they cumbered the ships to the despair of commanders and were never so welcome as when they ran away.²

The responsibility for jail-bird recruiting did not of course rest with the gangs. They saw the shady crew safe on board ship, that was all. Yet the odium of the thing was theirs. For not only did association with criminals lower the standard of pressing as the gangs practised it, it heightened the general disrepute in which they were held. For an institution whose hold upon the affections of the people was at the best positively negative, this was a serious matter. Every convict whom the gang safeguarded consequently drove another nail in the coffin preparing for it.

The first and most lasting effect of the wholesale

¹ 4 & 5 Anne, cap. 6.

² *Ad.* I. 1436—Letters of Capt. Aston, 1704-5.

pumping of sewage into the fleet was to taint the ships with a taint far more deadly than mere ineptitude. A spirit of ominous restlessness prevailed. Slackness was everywhere observable, coupled with incipient insubordination which no discipline, however severe, could eradicate or correct. At critical moments the men could with difficulty be held to their duty. To hold them to quarters in '97, when engaging the enemy off Brest, the rattan and the rope's-end had to be unsparingly used.¹ In no circumstances were they to be trusted. Given the slightest opening, they "ran" like water from a sieve. To counteract these dangerous tendencies the Marines were instituted. Drafted into the ships in thousands, they checked in a measure the surface symptoms of disaffection, but left the disease itself untouched. The fact was generally recognised, and it was no uncommon circumstance, when the number of pressed men present in a ship was large in proportion to the unpressed element, for both officers and marines to walk the deck day and night armed, fearful lest worse things should come upon them.² What they anticipated was the mutiny of individual crews. But a greater calamity than this was in store for them.

In the wholesale mutinies at Spithead and the Nore the blow fell with appalling suddenness, notwithstanding the fact that in one form or another it had been long foreseen. Fifty-five years had elapsed since Vernon, scenting danger from the existing mode

¹ *Ad.* I. 5125—Petition of the Company of H.M.S. *Nymph*, 1797.

² *Ad.* I. 1499—Capt. Bennett, 22 Sept. 1799, and Captains' Letters, *passim*.

of manning the fleet, had first sounded the alarm. He dreaded, he told the Lords Commissioners in so many words, the consequences that must sooner or later ensue from adherence to the press.¹ Though the utterance of one gifted with singularly clear prevision, the warning passed unheeded. Had it been made public, it would doubtless have met with the derision with which the voice of the national prophet is always hailed. Veiled as it was in service privacy, it moved their Lordships to neither comment nor action. Action, indeed, was out of the question. The Commissioners were helpless in the grip of a system from which, so far as human sagacity could then perceive, there was no way of escape. Let its issue be what it might, they could no more replace or reconstruct it than they could build ships of tinsel.

Other warnings were not wanting. For some years before the catastrophic happenings of '97 there flowed in upon the Admiralty a thin but steady stream of petitions from the seamen of the fleet, each of them a rude echo of Vernon's sapient warning. To these, coming as they did from an unconsidered source, little if any significance was attached. Beyond the most perfunctory inquiry, in no case to be made public, they received scant attention. The sailor, it was thought, must have his grievances if he would be happy; and petitions were the recognised line for him to air them on. They were accordingly relegated to that limbo of distasteful and quickly forgotten things, their Lordships' pigeon-holes.

Yet there was amongst these documents at least

¹ *Ad.* 1. 578—Vice-Admiral Vernon, 27 Jan. 1742-3.

one which should have given the Heads of the Navy pause for serious thought. It was the petition of the seamen of H.M.S. *Shannon*,¹ in which there was conveyed a threat that afterwards, when the mutiny at the Nore was at its height, under the leadership of a pressed man whose coadjutors were mainly pressed men, came within an ace of resolving itself in action. That threat concerned the desperate expedient of carrying the revolted ships into an enemy's port, and of there delivering them up. Had this been done—and only the Providence that watches over the destinies of nations prevented it—the act would have brought England to her knees.

At a time like this, when England's worst enemies were emphatically the press-gangs which manned her fleet with the riff-raff of the nation and thus made national disaster not only possible but hourly imminent, the "old stander" and the volunteer were to her Navy what salt is to the sea, its perpetual salvation. Such men inculcated an example, created an *esprit de corps*, that infected even the vagrant and the jail-bird, to say nothing of the better-class seaman, taken mainly by gangs operating on the water, who was often content, when brought into contact with loyal men, to settle down and do his best for king and country. Amongst the pressed men, again, desertion and death made for the survival of the fittest, and in this residuum there was not wanting a certain savour. Subdued and quickened by man-o'-war discipline, they developed a dogged resolution, a super-capacity not altogether incompatible with degeneracy ; and to

¹ *Ad. I.* 5125—Petition of the Ship's Company of the *Shannon*, 16 June 1796.

crown all, the men who officered the resolute if disreputable crew were men in whose blood the salt of centuries tingled, men unrivalled for sea-sagacity, initiative and pluck. If they could not uphold the honour of the flag with the pressed man's unqualified aid, they did what was immeasurably greater. They upheld it in spite of him.

Upon the trade of the nation the injury inflicted by the press-gang is rightly summed up in littles. Every able seaman, every callow apprentice taken out of or forcibly detained from a merchant vessel was, *ipso facto*, a minute yet irretrievably substantial loss to commerce of one kind or another. Trade, it is true, did not succumb in consequence. Possessed of marvellous recuperative powers, she did not even languish to any perceptible degree. Nevertheless, the detriment was there, a steadily cumulative factor, and at the end of any given period of pressing the commerce of the nation, emasculated by these continuous if infinitesimal abstractions from its vitality, was substantially less in bulk, substantially less in pounds sterling, than if it had been allowed to run its course unhindered.

British in name, but Teutonic in its resentments, trade came to regard these continual "pin-pricks" as an intolerable nuisance. It was not so much the loss that aroused her anger as the constant irritation she was subjected to. This she keenly resented, and the stream of her resentment, joining forces with its confluent the demoralisation of the Navy through pressing, the excessive cost of pressing and the antagonising effects of pressing upon the nation at large, contributed in no small degree to that final

supersession of the press-gang which was in essence, if not in name, the beginning of Free Trade.

To the people the impress was as an axe laid at the root of the tree. There was here no question, as with trade, of the mere loss of hands who could be replaced. Attacking the family in the person of its natural supporter and protector, the octopus system of which the gangs were the tentacles struck at the very foundations of domestic life and brought to thousands of households a poverty as bitter and a grief as poignant as death.

If the people were slow to anger under the infliction it was because, in the first place, the gang had its advocates who, though they could not extol its virtues, since it had none, were yet able, and that with no small measure of success, to demonstrate to a people as insular in their prejudices as in their habitat that, but for the invincible Navy which the gang maintained for their protection, the hereditary enemy, the detested French, would most surely come and compel them one and all to subsist upon a diet of frogs. What could be seriously urged against the gang in face of an argument such as that?

Patriotism, moreover, glowed with ardent flame. Fanned to twofold heat by natural hatred of the foreigner and his insolent challenge of insular superiority, it blinded the people to the truth that liberty of the subject is in reality nothing more than freedom from oppression. So, with the gang at their very doors, waiting to snatch away their husbands, their fathers and their sons, they carolled "Rule Britannia" and congratulated themselves on being a free people. The situation was unparalleled in its sardonic humour ;

and, as if this were not enough, the "Noodle of Newcastle," perceiving vacuously that something was still wanting, supplied the bathetic touch by giving out that the king, God bless him! could never prevail upon himself to break through the sacred liberties of his people save on the most urgent occasions.¹

The process of correcting the defective vision of the nation was as gradual as the acquisition of the sea-power the nation had set as its goal, and as painful. In both processes the gang participated largely. To the fleet it acted as a rude feeder; to the people as a ruder specialist. Wielding the cutlass as its instrument, it slowly and painfully hewed away the scales from their eyes until it stood visualised for what it really was—the most atrocious agent of oppression the world has ever seen. For the operation the people should have been grateful. The nature of the thing they had cherished so blindly filled them with rage and incited them to violence.

Two events now occurred to seal the fate of the gang and render its final supersession a mere matter of time rather than of debate or uncertainty. The mutiny at the Nore brought the people face to face with the appalling risks attendant on wholesale pressing, while the war with America, incurred for the sole purpose of upholding the right to press, taught them the lengths to which their rulers were still prepared to go in order to enslave them. In the former case their sympathies, though with the mutineers, were frozen at the fountain-head by fear of invasion and that supposititious diet of frogs. In the latter, as in the ancient quarrel between Admiralty

¹ *Newcastle Papers*—Newcastle to Yorke, 27 Feb. 1749-50.

and Trade, they went out to the party who not only abstained from pressing but paid the higher wages.

While the average cost of 'listing a man "voluntarily" rarely exceeded the modest sum of 30s., the expense entailed through recruiting him by means of the press-gang ranged from 3s. 9d. per head in 1570¹ to £114 in 1756. Between these extremes his cost fluctuated in the most extraordinary manner. At Weymouth, in 1762, it was at least £100; at Deal, in 1805, £32 odd; at Poole, in the same year, £80.² From 1756 the average steadily declined until in 1795 it touched its eighteenth century minimum of about £6.³ A sharp upward tendency then developed, and in the short space of eight years it soared again to £20. It was at this figure that Nelson, perhaps the greatest naval authority of his time, put it in 1803.⁴

Up to this point we have considered only the prime cost of the pressed man. A secondary factor must now be introduced, for when you had got your man at an initial cost of £20—a cost in itself out of all proportion to his value—you could never be sure of keeping him. Nelson calculated that during the war immediately preceding 1803 forty-two thousand seamen deserted from the fleet.⁴ Assuming, with him, that every man of this enormous total was either a

¹ *State Papers Domestic, Elizabeth*, vol. lxxiii. f. 38: Estimate of Charge for Pressing 400 Mariners, 1570.

² *London Chronicle*, 16–18 March, 1762; *Ad.* 1. 581—Admiral Berkeley, 14 Feb. and 5 Aug. 1805.

³ *Ad.* 1. 579—Average based on Admirals' Reports on Rendezvous, 1791–5.

⁴ *Ad.* 1. 580—Memorandum on the State of the Fleet, 1803.

pressed man or had been procured at the cost of a pressed man, the loss entailed upon the nation by their desertion represented an outlay of £840,000 for raising them in the first instance, and, in the second, a further outlay of £840,000 for replacing them.

In this estimate there is, however, a substantial error; for, approaching the question from another point of view, let us suppose, as we may safely do without overstraining the probabilities of the case, that out of every three men pressed at least one ran from his rating. Now the primary cost of pressing three men on the £20 basis being £60, it follows that in order to obtain their ultimate cost to the country we must add to that sum the outlay incurred in pressing another man in lieu of the one who ran. The total cost of the three men who ultimately remain to the fleet consequently works out at £80; the cost of each at £26, 13s. 4d. Hence Nelson's forty-two thousand deserters entailed upon the nation an actual expenditure, not of £1,680,000, but of nearly two and a quarter millions.

Another fact that emerges from a scrutiny of these remarkable figures is this. Whenever the number of volunteer additions to the fleet increased, the cost of pressing increased in like ratio; whenever the number of volunteers declined, the pressed man became proportionally cheaper. Periods in which the pressed man was scarce and dear thus synchronise with periods when the volunteer was plentiful; but scarcity of volunteers, reacting upon the gangs, and conducing to their greater activity, brought in pressed men in greater numbers in proportion to expenditure and so reduced the cost per head. In this logical

though at first sight bewildering interrelation of the laws of supply and demand, we have in a nutshell the whole case for the cost of pressing as against the gang. Taking one year with another the century through, the impress service, on a moderate estimate, employed enough able-bodied men to man a first-rate ship of the line, and absorbed at least enough money to maintain her, while the average number of men raised, taking again one year with another, rarely if ever exceeded the number of men engaged in obtaining them. With tranquillity at length assured to the country, with trade in a state of high prosperity, the shipping tonnage of the nation rising by leaps and bounds and the fleet reduced to an inexigent peace footing, why incur the ruinous expense of pressing the seaman when, as was now the case, he could be had for the asking or the making?

For Peace brought in her train both change and opportunity. The frantic dumping of all sorts and conditions of men into the fleet ceased. Necessity no longer called for it. No enemy hovered in the offing, to be perpetually outmanœuvred or instantly engaged. Until that enemy could renew its strength, or time should call another into being, the mastery of the seas, the dear prize of a hundred years of strenuous struggle, remained secure. Our ships, maintained nevertheless as efficient fighting-machines, became schools of leisure wherein—a thing impossible amid the perpetual storm and stress of war—the young blood of the nation could be more gradually inured to the sea and tuned to fighting-pitch. Science had not yet linked hands with warfare. Steam, steel, the ironclad, the super-Dreadnought

and the devastating cordite gun were still in the womb of the future ; but the keels of a newer fleet were nevertheless already on the slips, and with the old order the press-gang, now for ever obsolete, went the way of all things useless.

Its memory still survives. Those who despair of our military system, or of our lack of it, talk of conscription. They alone forget. A people who for a hundred years patiently endured conscription in its most cruel form will never again suffer it to be lightly inflicted upon them.

APPENDIX

ADMIRAL YOUNG'S TORPEDO

DEAR NEPEAN, — I enclose a little project for destroying the Enemy's Flatboats if they venture over to our Coast, which you may shew, if you please, to your Sea Lords as coming from some anonymous correspondent. If they can improve upon it so as to make it useful, I shall be glad of it; and if they think it good for nothing, and throw it in the fire, there is no harm done. As the conveying an Army must require a very great number of Boats, which must be very near each other, if many such vessels as I propose should get among them, they must necessarily commit great havoc. I cannot ascertain whether the blocks or logs of wood would be strong enough to throw the shot without bursting, or whether they would not throw the shot though they should burst. I think they would not burst, and so do some Officers of Artillery here; but that might be ascertained by experiment at any time. This sort of Fire-vessel will have the advantage of costing very little; and of being of no service to the Enemy should it fall into their hands.

W. YOUNG.

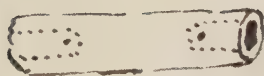
LEWES, 14 *Aug.* 1803.

Secret

“ The success of an attempt to land an Army on an Enemy’s Coast, whose Army is prepared to prevent it, will depend in a great degree on the regularity of the order in which the Boats, or Vessels, are arranged, that carry the Troops on Shore ; everything therefore which contributes to the breaking of that order will so far contribute to render success more doubtful ; especially if, in breaking the order, some of the Boats or Vessels are destroyed. For this purpose Fireships well managed will be found very useful ; I should therefore think that, at all the King’s Ports, and at all places where the Enemy may be expected to attempt a landing with Ships of War or other large Vessels, considerable quantities of materials for fitting Fireships according to the latest method should be kept ready to be put on board any small Vessels on the Enemy’s approach ; but, as such Vessels would have little or no effect on Gunboats or Flatboats, machines might be made for the purpose of destroying them, by shot, and by explosion. The Shot should be large, but as they will require to be thrown but a short distance, and will have only thin-sided Vessels to penetrate, Machines strong enough to resist the effort of the small quantity of Powder necessary to throw them may probably be made of wood ; either by making several chambers in one thick Block, as No. 1, or one chamber at each end of a log as No. 2, which may be used either separately, or fastened together. The Vents should communicate with each other by means of quick Match, which



Nº 1.



Nº 2.



ADMIRAL YOUNG'S TORPEDO.

From the Original Drawing at the Public Record Office.

should be very carefully covered to prevent its sustaining damage, or being moved by things carried about. Such Machines, properly loaded, may be kept in Fishing boats or other small vessels near the parts of the Coast where the Enemy may be expected to land; or in secure places, ready to be put on board when the Enemy are expected. The Chambers should be cut horizontally, and the Machine should be so placed in the Vessel as to have them about level with the surface of the water; under the Machine should be placed a considerable quantity of Gunpowder; and over it, large Stones, and bags of heavy shingle, and the whole may be covered with fishing nets, or any articles that may happen to be on board. Several fuses, or trains of Match, should communicate with the Machine, and with the powder under it, so managed as to ensure those which communicate with the Machine taking effect upon the others, that the shot may be thrown before the Vessel is blown up. The Match, or Fuses, should be carefully concealed to prevent their being seen if the Vessel should be boarded. . . . If these Vessels are placed in the front of the Enemy's Line, and not near the extremities of it, it would be scarcely possible for them to avoid the effects of the explosion unless, from some of them exploding too soon, the whole armament should stop. Every Machine would probably sink the Boat on each side of it, and so do considerable damage to others with the shot; and would kill and wound many men by the explosion and the fall of the stones. . . . As the success of these Vessels will depend entirely upon their not being suspected by the Enemy, the utmost secrecy

must be observed in preparing the Machines and sending them to the places where they are to be kept. A few confidential men only should be employed to make them, and they should be so covered as to prevent any suspicion of their use, or of what they contain."

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